

STAR TREK: *Endeavour*: "Acheron"

by RIGIL KENT

Genre: Action/Adventure, Drama

Rated: PG-13 ... language, violence, and adult situations.

Summary: Sequel to *Endeavour: Pandora*. Starfleet goes on the offensive but discovers that not all is as it appears...

Disclaimer: The evil monkeys at Paramount own Trek. Or is it CBS now? Eh. Who cares? Whoever it is that's fraking the franchise up now...

Author's Note:

Major thanks (again) to **TJinLOCA** for being an awesome beta. An immense thank you to **Chris1033** for his fantastic "covers" for the previous fics and of course, for this one as well. I'd be remiss if I failed to thank both **HtH2K4** and **Kevin Thomas Riley** for giving me astounding assistance throughout the creative process. Many thanks also go to **Jedikatie** for pointing me to the Romulan words. Thanks all!

The revised look of the *Endeavour* was originally developed by Mark Ward for the NX Class Mod Pack for *Bridge Commander*, although it was credited as the NCC-05 *Atlantis*. Mr. Ward has graciously given me permission to use this "skin" for the look of *Endeavour* – if I had discovered this thing *before* writing *Vigrid*, the -06 would have looked like this all along.

This is the sequel to *Endeavour: Pandora*. It'll be a little difficult to follow without reading that first. Like my previous fics, I'm writing this as prose and using the basic screenplay format (Teaser + 5 acts).

DRAMATIS PERSONAE – UES ENDEAVOUR (NC-06)

Commanding Officer (CO): **Charles Tucker, III** - Captain (CPT)

Executive Officer (XO): **T'Pol** - also Senior Science/Sensor Officer (SCI) - Commander (CDR)

Chief Tactical Officer (TAC): **Heinrich ("Rick") Eisler**, 3IC - Lieutenant Commander (LCDR)

Chief of Engineering (ENG or ChEng): **Anna Hess**, 4IC - Lieutenant Commander (LCDR)

Senior Helmsman/Navigator (NAV): **Daniel Hsiao**, Lieutenant (LT)

Senior Communications/Linguistics Officer (COM): **Marie Devereux**, Lieutenant (LT)

Weapons System Officer: **Nathaniel Hayes** – also Roughneck 6 (OIC) - Lieutenant Junior Grade (LT JG)

Chief Medical Officer (CMO): **Phlox**, equivalent rank of LTCDR

Chief of the Boat (COB): **Colin Mackenzie**, Master Chief Petty Officer (MCPO), senior enlisted man.

SECFORCE - "ROUGHNECKS"

SEAL 7 (NCOIC): **Lee Luckabaugh** – Senior Chief Petty Officer (SCPO), enlisted

STAB 7 (NCOIC): **Miguel Gray** – Senior Chief Petty Officer (SCPO), enlisted

TEASER

The data had not changed.

Leaning back from his console, Subcommander D'deridex exhaled slightly in relief as his console chirped. It had taken a great deal of effort on his part, but the power fluctuations in the transmitter array were no longer reading green. They were finally ready to progress to the next stage.

When Admiral Valdore had tasked him with this duty, the subcommander had initially assumed that it was a punishment detail or perhaps a subtle reminder that, despite his pureblood heritage, D'deridex was unique among his fellow Rihannsu. The subcommander's fascination with the Terrans was considered a thing for mocking, not for emulation, and many had been the casual insult directed toward him for his attraction to all things Terran. Even D'deridex himself acknowledged that it was an unhealthy obsession that led him to learn Terran Standard English, or to study intercepted historical documentaries as if they were the words of S'Task himself. D'deridex's defense was always the same: when one understood the Enemy, one could more easily defeat him. Even if one did not understand why the Terrans found it necessary to highlight the comedic exploits of a shipwrecked crew, or to focus on the clearly fictional adventures of a military organization utilizing a ring-based transmat device, or to observe sporting events that had no apparent purpose aside from leisure, one could still learn a great deal from such modes of entertainment.

Evidently, Valdore agreed.

Nearly two *dierha* had passed since the Terran ship had been destroyed as it attempted to sneak into the system that Rihannsu starcharts identified as LV-426. Even before the passive sensor net that the fleet had in place around the system had detected the ship's arrival, Valdore had predicted its presence. With absolute certainty, the admiral had pointed to the sector from which the Terran ship would appear, and the surprised looks from his command staff when his prediction came true had caused him to smile grimly.

Rising from his station, the subcommander turned to stride from the command-executive center, holding the data device that contained his work. To his surprise, he found Admiral Valdore standing in the doorway, features twisted in an angry scowl. As always, D'deridex found himself intimidated by the admiral's hulking size and powerful build. Rumor held that the admiral had once killed two *kl'in-ghanns* with his bare hands, and the subcommander believed it as fact.

"Report," the admiral demanded, and D'deridex snapped to attention as he responded.

"Communication adjustments have been made according to your specifications, *Daise'Khre'Riov*," the subcommander replied, making sure to use the admiral's proper rank. One of the many things that D'deridex had learned since being assigned to the *Ra'kholh* was that the admiral was a stickler for protocol.

"*Mnekha*," Valdore smiled in approval. He pinned D'deridex with a flat look. "Make the transmission in exactly six *siuren*." The admiral gave him a smile that was only a shade warmer than any other expression that Valdore normally wore. "I'm trusting you with this, *Erei'Riov* D'deridex. Don't fail me."

Swallowing the intimidation that threatened to rob him of efficiency, D'deridex saluted sharply and turned toward the communications array, his heart pounding. Failure now would likely result in his death, and he still had dreams of dying an old, old man. With a less than subtle head jerk, he displaced

the subcenturion seated there before inputting the commands that would bring the comm adjustment online. Glancing at the integrated chronometer, he struggled to ignore the admiral's silent presence behind him. At the appropriate time, he pressed a button and spoke.

"Starfleet Command, this is *Stockholm*," he declared in perfect Terran English. "Stand by to receive updated telemetry."

ACT ONE

The telemetry revealed nothing new.

Expression set in a frown, Trip Tucker studied the newly installed holo-table with the focus that he normally reserved for engineering problems. It was exactly as the earlier battle plans had painted it, but, for some reason, the data crawling across his screen caused his skin to itch. Glancing up from the table, he met T'Pol's stoic expression with one of his own. She quirked an eyebrow before returning her eyes to the table. Without the bond, he realized, he would never have been able to tell how tired she was at this moment.

"As you can see from this information," Admiral Black's voice echoed out of the wall speakers, "Commander Lundmark's scan has verified our initial concerns about the construction facility."

"The Xindi ships are gone," Commodore Archer noted from the head of the holo-table. He was manipulating the controls with practiced ease, but Trip realized that wasn't very surprising. After all, this secure briefing room had been converted to a combat control facility. During the engagement it would be Archer's station, so the commodore had to be familiar with the table.

"There are also only two Warbirds," an Australian voice pointed out, and it took a moment for Tucker to recognize Commodore Burnside Clapp through the comm distortions.

"Will *Stockholm* be providing realtime telemetry?" another voice asked, and Trip mentally shrugged when he realized that he didn't recognize the woman speaking.

"That's the intent," Black said. "As long as Commander Lundmark can remain undetected, *Stockholm* will be sending data bursts with updated situation reports." For a moment, the conference call was silent as the various ship and fleet commanders digested the data before them. In that heartbeat, Trip found himself reflecting on *Endeavour's* status. With Lieutenant Hsiao still aboard the UES *Hyperion*, Tucker's principal flight operations officer was a newly minted ensign just out of STC. Several minor systems had been declared operational, but hadn't been sufficiently field tested for Tucker's tastes. None of the primary systems were a concern, though, so that was a relief.

A mental nudge brought him back to the present, and Trip glanced up to meet T'Pol's steady (albeit slightly amused) gaze. She still hadn't explained how a door had mysteriously appeared in the wall shared by their respective cabins. In that hazy moment of semi-consciousness when he had awakened to find her walking through the wall, he had been unaccountably reminded of seeing Daniels do that very thing. Despite his feelings for her, Trip found the thought of T'Pol being even remotely involved in that temporal nonsense chilling.

"Operation Pandora has a green light," Fleet Admiral Gardner's voice sounded. "Second and Sixth Fleets will deploy at zero nine hundred tomorrow as planned."

"Third and Fourth Fleets are to deploy at ten hundred hours, also as planned," Black picked up the instructions. Trip found himself nodding slightly. One of Commodore Archer's additions to the plan had been to send two fleets in diversionary maneuvers intended to make it appear as though they were planning to retake the Vigrid system. Even though the station had been destroyed, the system itself remained a strategic vantage point that the Romulans needed to hold to maintain their invasion. It was

hoped that just the hints of an attempt to reclaim the system would force the Romulans to direct additional resources to hold the system.

"Orders are to remain sealed for the members of your crews outside of your command staff until you are underway," the Vice Chief of Naval Operations continued. "Operational security is absolutely essential for this mission to succeed." Trip fought the urge to roll his eyes: when was OPSEC *not* essential for a mission's success?

"Good luck," Admiral Gardner offered before the comm line went silent.

"Here we go," Archer muttered into the moment of silence that followed. He looked up from the table, smiling slightly at them. "Didn't mean to get the two of you out of bed," he smirked, innuendo dripping from his voice. Trip gave the commodore a dark look before adjusting the robe that he wore over his pajama bottoms. Both had been a gift from T'Pol on his last birthday; as he had learned, Triaxian silk made fantastic night clothes for men too.

Besides, it was better for morale if he actually showed up on the bridge wearing clothes during emergencies.

Still in her duty uniform, T'Pol gave the commodore a single upraised and unamused eyebrow before turning her focus to Trip. He already knew what she was going to say before she spoke.

"I will alert the department heads, Captain," she informed him in her normal monotone before turning toward the door.

"And get a status report from Dan," he instructed. As she exited the room, T'Pol gave him a backwards glance that he instantly recognized as her subtle way of telling him to shut up so she could do her job. Despite himself, he grinned for a moment before turning to Archer. "Any orders, Commodore?" he asked.

"Coffee," Archer replied with an exaggerated sigh. "Lots of coffee. And I'll need my team roused out of bed." His expression suddenly changed to one of worry. He tried to hide it, but Trip had known him too long to not recognize it.

"Something wrong, sir?" Tucker asked, and the commodore gave him a glower for a moment. Finally, the older man sighed again and nodded, his fierce expression faltering. He gestured to the holo-table.

"This," he said. "I'm a pilot, Trip, not a soldier." The commodore's shoulders slumped slightly. "Yet here I am, about to command a *fleet*." He glanced at Tucker with worried eyes. "I don't think I'm ready for this."

"Who is?" Trip asked softly. "I know I sure as hell wasn't ready for *my* job when you pinned the extra pip on my uniform." Archer smiled at that, and Tucker took a moment to bask in the memory. It had been difficult, with Jon barely able to move from the emergency surgery that had been required to save his life. T'Pol had been looking on from a nearby biobed, eyes gleaming with pride, as Hoshi read the orders and Phlox smiled broadly. Trip knew it was a memory that he would cherish until his body was returned to the stars.

"Go get dressed, Trip," Archer ordered with another smile. "You don't look very captainly in your silk jammies."

"T'Pol thinks I cut a dashing figure in these things," Tucker retorted as he rounded the table and headed for the door. He grinned. "She told me that I was very aesthetically appealing in blue."

"Now *that's* a compliment for the ages," the commodore snickered before returning his full attention to the holo-table. "Don't forget the coffee," he reminded Trip.

An hour later, Tucker was in the *Endeavour* briefing room, studying the expressions of his command staff. Sipping from the cup that contained the herbal Vulcan tea that T'Pol insisted he drink, he winced briefly at the taste. To his dismay (but not surprise), Senior Chief Killick had flatly refused to provide him with coffee, claiming that the first officer had already threatened dire consequences if he did so.

Apparently, the chef was more afraid of T'Pol than of his commanding officer.

Lieutenant Commander Eisler was glowering at the data flashing on the screen and, to Trip's dismay, he appeared as sharp-eyed and coherent as ever. Knowing that the tactical officer had spent most if not all of the night studying the battle plan, Trip found himself wondering how the German managed to not look tired. *Maybe he's a robot under that flesh*, Trip mused, recalling a recent entry into *Endeavour's* movie night. T'Pol had not been amused by the time travel aspect of the classic film.

Seated alongside the tactical officer as usual, Lieutenant Commander Hess appeared as tired as Trip felt, and was downing coffee by the liter. Her uniform was rumpled, as if she had slept in it, and there were grease stains on her left hand. She looked exactly like someone who had spent the last twenty hours purging EPS manifolds.

Trip tried not to envy her too much.

"Communication systems will be hardcoded to my authorization codes," Tucker continued his briefing. Lieutenant Devereux glanced up from the PADD in front of her, a flicker of hurt crossing her face. "This comes directly from Starfleet Command," Trip continued. He understood the lieutenant's sense of betrayal; this was tantamount to saying that she wasn't trusted. "And is a fleet-wide order. I have to approve *any* communication going out."

"Lieutenant Hsiao is still on the *Hyperion*," Devereux pointed out, and Trip nodded before glancing to T'Pol.

"Commander Rivers has indicated that the fault in *Hyperion's* flight computer has not yet been isolated," the Vulcan revealed. "He is confident that the problem will be repaired before departure time."

"And if it isn't?" Hess asked. As she had since he first met her, Anna ignored the protocols that their respective ranks called for. It was one of the things that Trip liked the most about her. "Seems pretty stupid to launch without our chief helmsman on board."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Trip replied. He turned to Eisler, an expectant look on his face.

"Weapon systems are fully checked out, sir," the lieutenant commander growled, clearly recognizing his cue. "All phase cannons have been zeroed and are prepared for action."

"Any complaints about the new ordnance?" Tucker asked. The tactical officer's expression darkened.

"With all due respect to Starfleet Command," Eisler said angrily, "whoever decided to fund these mark sixes should be lined up against a wall and shot." Trip gave him a startled look; Rick was rarely so open about any disagreements he had with Starfleet Command in front of junior officers. Clearly, Hess had been a bad influence on the tactical officer. "I don't care if we can shoot more of them, sir," Eisler continued. "If what we *do* shoot doesn't penetrate, then it's a waste of time."

"Like shooting BBs against a concrete wall," Master Chief Mackenzie agreed sourly.

"I'll pass that on," Trip replied. "New hull polarizers checking out?" he asked, and the master chief replied even before the TAC.

"We're reading a twenty percent increase in efficiency," Mackenzie confirmed almost proudly. Understandably so: the master chief had headed the team that reverse-engineered the Orion hull polarizers. Hess gave the COB a sidelong glance, amusement written on her face.

"Twenty-three percent, actually," she corrected. Trip nodded, then glanced at Phlox. The Denobulan gave him a weak smile, reminding Tucker once more how much he missed the doctor's cheerful optimism. Silently, he cursed this damned war for what it had taken from everyone.

"Sickbay is fully operational," the doctor declared, "and ready for casualty collection." Phlox grimaced slightly at his words. "Lieutenant Reyes is settling in nicely, as are the new medical technicians."

"Good." Trip rose to his feet. Without hesitation, his command staff followed suit. "Brief your departments," he instructed. "We deploy in three hours."



Less than two hours remained before deployment, and Commodore Jonathan Archer could already feel his stress level skyrocketing.

Standing before the holo-table, he studied the telemetry received from *Stockholm* with a critical eye and growing worry. He could feel the eyes of his combat control team on him as he panned across the system one more time, but he paid it little attention. Ten ships were relying on him to be the best fleet commander he could be, and he intended to live up to that.

"Something wrong, sir?" Lieutenant Reynolds asked from his position at the table. Jon gave him a quick glance, noting with approval how easily the lieutenant had effectively assumed command of the team. As the only real combat veteran in the group, Reynolds was technically outranked by Lieutenant Esque but, to her credit, the senior lieutenant had stepped down from the leadership position. He wasn't sure, but Jon suspected that the junior officers of the team had actually been behind the leadership change; surprisingly, there was very little tension between Esque and Reynolds over the situation.

"Something stinks," Archer replied as he began manipulating the holo-table controls for another sweep of the digital system. He zoomed in toward the drydock and spent a long moment studying it. The resolution of the image wasn't as good as he'd like it to be, but it was sharp enough to determine that the construction of the facility was not as far along as they had originally suspected.

"Any chance you could elaborate on that, sir?" Reynolds' tone was wry, and Jon looked up, a hint of a smile on his face. In the year plus since he had tapped Scott Reynolds to join his staff, Archer had nearly given up on getting the man to relax around him. Like most other ex-MACOs currently serving in Starfleet, Reynolds' strict adherence to military protocol marked him as a different breed of officer. At no time did the young lieutenant ever seem to forget Archer's rank.

"Where did the warbirds go?" Jon asked rhetorically as he input commands into the table controls. The master image returned to a system overview, with pulsing boxes highlighting the Romulan forces present. "This facility is too valuable to guard with a couple of warbirds and fifteen birds of prey."

"Has the telemetry been authenticated?" Lieutenant Esque asked, her face set in a frown. The three ensigns on the team gave her a startled look, as if they had never really considered the idea of the *Stockholm* being suborned. Archer nodded.

"Twice," he revealed. He refocused his attention to the data crawling across the screen and glowered darkly. In his twenty plus years of service in Starfleet, Jon had learned to obey his instincts without hesitation, and right now, they were screaming that this was too easy. The Romulans couldn't be this stupid, could they? They *had* to know that Starfleet would have learned of the construction facility in this system, so defending it with so few resources made no sense.

Unfortunately, that was all too often the case with the Romulans. Jon frowned as he zoomed in on the planetary ring that surrounded the planet. There was little doubt that the Romulans intended to use the various ores that could be found in the ring for ship construction; that had, after all, been the intent when Earth established the mining colony in the first place.

Glancing at the time, Archer realized that he had barely moved since Trip had left almost an hour earlier. He looked up to find the team sitting awkwardly at their positions, desperately trying to look like they were accomplishing something important when they clearly had nothing to do. Jon fought to hide his amusement.

"Lieutenant Reynolds," he said softly as he returned his attention to the display in front of him. "That will be all for the moment." Jon looked up with a tight smile. "Go get some breakfast, people."

"Aye, sir," Reynolds replied for the team. With visible relief, they rose from their positions and filed through the door, leaving only the lieutenant behind. "Can I get you anything, Commodore?" he asked, clearly recognizing that Archer had no intention of leaving. Jon nodded.

"Coffee." He hefted his empty cup and nodded toward the empty pot on the nearby warmer. "We're out."

"Yes, sir." Reynolds ducked through the doorway, leaving Archer alone in the room.

Several minutes passed without interruption as Jon studied the system display from every conceivable angle. Internal alarms were still screeching within his head, and he found himself glaring at the holo-

table, as if it was responsible for his inability to find the problem. Everything was pointing toward the plan advancing as it should.

"Something wrong?" Trip's voice came as a surprise, and Archer jerked slightly before tossing a quick glare at his old friend. Tucker was in uniform now, every centimeter the Starfleet captain, and was sipping from one of those mugs that T'Pol seemed to favor while aboard *Enterprise*.

"I don't know," Jon replied sharply. He rose from his seat and stretched, trying to ignore the cacophony of pops from his body as he did so. "Pre-game jitters, I guess," he continued as Trip approached. The captain placed the cup on the table and began manipulating the controls of the station in front of him.

"I'm worried too," Trip revealed. He sighed as he began studying the drydock. "Any idea what happened to the rest of the warbirds?" Jon shook his head.

"Nothing yet." He looked up. "Maybe they bought the Thor's Cradle diversion." Tucker shrugged.

"Maybe." He didn't sound as if he believed it as he crossed his arms behind his back and stared at the partially constructed drydock without blinking for a long moment. Jon shivered slightly; it was eerie when Trip channeled T'Pol in this way. The Charles Tucker that the commodore knew was always in motion, not this unmoving human statue who studied the data with a Vulcan-like focus. Sometimes, Jon found himself glancing at Trip's ears, half expecting them to be pointed. It was a silly notion, of course, but when Tucker entered his "Vulcan mode," it was hard to believe that he was the same man who had once danced on a table at the 602 Club.

Abruptly, Jon's stomach growled slightly and he glanced in the direction of the door, idly wondering if Reynolds was still in the mess hall. He briefly toyed with reaching for the comm panel and asking the lieutenant to bring him some food while he was at it, but discarded the notion almost before it occurred to him. A curious smell drifted to Archer's nose and he gave the steaming cup that Trip had brought with him a suspicious look. It didn't smell like coffee. On impulse, he reached for the mug and sniffed at its contents. Instantly, he gave Tucker an incredulous look.

"Tea?" he asked with faux disgust. "She's got you drinking tea now?" Embarrassment crossed Trip's face as he reclaimed his mug, once more the man that Jon had known for nearly twenty years.

"I made a deal with her," he muttered softly, going out of his way to avoid meeting Jon's eyes. Despite his earlier dark mood, Archer found himself on the brink of laughing outright. "She wants me to cut back on the caffeine," Trip admitted almost sheepishly.

"No steak, no coffee," Jon said as he began ticking off fingers, a grin on his face. "What's next, Trip? No pie?" The flash of horror that crossed Tucker's face was something that Archer wished he could frame.

"That's not funny," the younger man grumbled, despite the fact that it *was* funny. Jon smirked.

"She's got you on a short leash, Mister Tucker," he chuckled. It was one of those odd idiosyncrasies that Jonathan Archer knew about the relationship between Trip and T'Pol, while Commodore Archer remained blithely ignorant of it. It was nothing new, though; Jon had been looking the other way in regards to the two ever since he realized that they were more than friends in the Expanse. Selective observation was a good thing, he had decided when he had first noticed the change in their relationship.

As long as he had plausible deniability, Command couldn't tell him to step in and do something he had no desire to do.

Not that he ever really did what Command wanted him to anyway...

"Speaking of," Trip responded, a shrewd glint in his eyes, "how's Erika?"

"That's a low blow," Archer replied as he shook his head. He returned his attention to the holo-table in silent acknowledgment that the younger man had struck a telling blow while ignoring the smug look that Trip shot him. It was only a temporary cease-fire, but Jon was sure that he would find another way to harass Trip about his relationship with T'Pol. Unless Trip beat him to it, of course.

The moment he began studying the holo-table, however, his good mood began to dissolve. There *had* to be something that he was missing, something that would explain why the Romulans had backed off the way they did. The thought that it could be a trap had already occurred to him, but *Stockholm's* transmission had been authenticated by no less than three different comm-techs. If it was a trap, then it meant that the Romulans had access to even more classified information than seemed possible.

Assume it's a trap, Jon told himself grimly. *Knowing where the trap is – that's the first step in evading it*. He exhaled softly as he gave the nearby chronometer a glance.

Under two hours to go.



At T minus thirty, Lieutenant Daniel Hsiao found himself fighting off a skull-crushing headache.

When the pain began, he had already been aboard the *Hyperion* for nearly sixty hours, trying to track down a seemingly nonexistent fault in the *Daedalus*-class ship's flight avionics. Lieutenant Commander Selma Rodriguez, the ship's executive officer and senior helmsman, had been at his side for nearly the entire time and, despite their mutual frustration, had somehow managed to avoid responding to his short temper. It was only one of the things that made her so damned attractive.

"Remind me again why *I'm* doing this?" he grumbled as he pushed himself deeper into the bowels of the ship's flight controls. Rodriguez almost snorted.

"Because this stupid upgrade was based on *your* suggestions," she replied. They were flat on their backs and head to head in the cramped alcove, both staring up at the circuitry that should have been working instead of shorting out ship's avionics at random and amazingly inopportune intervals. "And you convinced the commodore that *you* could do it faster than any of my engineers."

Dan sighed at her comment and, for what felt like the thousandth time, silently cursed himself for ever proposing that the upgrade he'd developed for *Endeavour's* flight systems could work on a *Daedalus*. Even if the *Hyperion's* systems were based on technology originally field tested on *Enterprise* and *Columbia*, the ship classes now seemed too different for any such upgrades to work properly. Unfortu-

nately, Hsiao's shooting off of his mouth about his capabilities had led the engineering team to leave the entire thing in his less than capable hands. If nothing else, this had taught him when to keep his mouth shut in the future.

"The RK36 junction is reading as faulty," Rodriguez pointed out as she tried to maneuver in the cramped space. Armed with a circuit reader and a specialized PADD for this very purpose, she was his eyes and ears. "That might be the problem."

"That junction isn't even part of the upgrade!" Dan muttered as he pushed himself closer to the named circuit junction. Placing the tip of the testing tool to the faulty junction, he glowered at the result. "It's dead," he declared. A thought occurred to him, and he checked the surrounding circuits as well. "Dammit ... they're all dead." He craned his head to look at *Hyperion's* first officer. "How long will it take to pull this entire junction and replace it?" he asked. As she scrunched her nose up in thought, Hsiao found himself distracted by her brown eyes. *Now is not the time*, he reminded himself as he forced himself to look someplace else.

Anywhere else.

"At least twenty, twenty-five minutes," the lieutenant commander mused in response to his question, biting her lips as she did.

"That's cutting it pretty close," Dan remarked. He began making some mental calculations: It would take a minimum of twenty-five minutes to get him transferred back to *Endeavour* via shuttlepod, which would take them to T minus five. Glancing back at Rodriguez, he could see she was having the same thoughts.

"We don't know if this is the actual problem," Hsiao continued. "If it isn't, *Hyperion* still can't fly and my job isn't done."

"Guess you're staying for a bit," she said with a beautiful smile. "We can beam you over to *Endeavour* if time runs out." Dan shuddered at the thought of using the transporter; so far, he'd managed to avoid having to use the damned thing, and, knowing that there weren't any other options left, he swallowed the lump in his throat. *The things I do for Earth*, he reflected darkly as he began pulling the fried circuits.

"I better tell the Skipper," Rodriguez sighed, before pushing herself out from under the control circuits. Without thinking, Dan frowned at mention of Commander Rivers; they had butted heads from the moment that Hsiao had come aboard *Hyperion* and it seemed Rivers saw the lieutenant's presence as a personal attack on his command. As time passed and the source of the fault remained unknown, the commander's aggression had only intensified, and Dan found himself very glad that Lieutenant Commander Rodriguez was acting as a buffer between them.

As he removed the fried circuit panels, Hsiao found himself mentally grumbling at the design flaws of the *Hyperion*. What kind of idiot would put the avionics control in such a difficult place to reach? They were nearly as hard to reach as the power cell on his mother's ground car.

The ease with which the circuit panels were removed belied his initial thoughts, though, and he found himself grudgingly admitting that, despite how godawful ugly the *Daedalus*-class was, the efficiency with which they could be repaired was a major advantage. Every single system aboard the ship was de-

signed to be generic and interchangeable with other ships of the same class. The flight controls of the *Hyperion*, for example, could be pulled and placed into the *Prometheus* or the *Odysseus* or any other *Daedalus*-class in service without needing a single adjustment or upgrade. The same couldn't be said of any other ship class in the Fleet.

Within seconds, Lieutenant Commander Rodriguez had rejoined him. They worked in silence for a few minutes until Hsiao could stand it no longer. He drew in a deep breath.

"I'm sorry I insulted your ship," he said. Three hours earlier, he had made some less than diplomatic comments about the *Hyperion* that the lieutenant commander had clearly taken offense over. While he still thought that the ship was uglier than any he'd seen, it probably hadn't been his smartest decision to reveal his thoughts on the matter to her.

"You better be," Rodriguez retorted in an almost teasing tone. "Wrong circuit," she continued as he started to replace one of the ruined boards. Dan glanced at it and grit his teeth in annoyance as he looked for the right one.

"Thought you were a pilot," he began, pushing the board into its proper place. "Never took you for a grease monkey."

"My dad was an engineer's mate on the *Republic*." She flashed him a bright smile. "He always wanted a son, so he made damned sure that I knew my way around engines." With a grunt of effort, she pulled an especially damaged board free. "We should check the relays. Maybe the upgrade is causing the feedback and fried these."

"That doesn't make sense," Dan argued. "The transfer circuits *are* working." He gave her a sharp look when she snickered. "What?"

"It's not your fault," the lieutenant commander smiled, almost as she were quoting something or someone. "Never mind," she said when he continued to give her a confused look. "I'll double check the relays. *Hyperion's* power usage is different than *Endeavour's* so that might be where the problem is."

"I suppose," he conceded.

"What about you?" Rodriguez asked once she had extricated herself from the tiny alcove. "I thought *you* were a pilot too." She was half crouched in front of the relays, and it took every gram of Hsiao's willpower to avoid ogling her posterior. *Now is definitely not the time*, he reminded himself.

"My degree is in aeronautical engineering," he revealed. "Joined Starfleet in hopes of being the next Cochrane or Henry Archer." Dan shrugged as he pushed another circuit board into place. "Found out that I'm a better pilot than I ever was an engineer though." He could feel her eyes on him and felt that he had to explain. "I'm great at refining previous designs, but I don't have that instinctive ... feel for machinery that great engineers need."

"Like your captain." Rodriguez was smiling again. She had very white teeth, Dan noted.

"Like my captain," Hsiao agreed with a smile of his own. "How are we reading now?"

"Better." *Hyperion's* first officer input several commands into the nearby. "But still not right." She gave him a quick look. "I think we're on the right track, though."

With a grunt, Dan pulled himself out from under the alcove and climbed to his feet. He glanced over the data before nodding.

"Yeah," he agreed as he pulled his PADD out of his left cargo pocket. He could feel her eyes on him as he began tapping on the small data device. "If we reroute the power through Junction CV-394," he declared after a moment of study, "it should work." He offered her the PADD.

"We'll need some help," Rodriguez pointed out as she returned the data device to him. Before he could respond, she was turning toward the nearby comm panel. "Lieutenant O'Reilly to flight ops," she said the moment that she depressed the transmit button. "Bring three engineers."

"On my way," came the quick response. The lieutenant commander released the button and turned her attention back to Dan.

"We better get to work," she said, nodding toward the door.

"Yeah," he agreed before glancing at his chronometer. They were running out of time.



Time had run out.

The chirp of the chronometer alarm pulled Commander T'Pol out of her study of the data before her, and caused her to glance up at the wall monitor. With her normal duties completed, she had been studying one of Trip's theories about reducing the induced and parasitic drag of the warp field in an attempt to obtain additional velocity. She wasn't quite sure when he had found the time to make these calculations, but, as she had studied the theory, she had found herself once more fascinated by his analytical process. No matter how much time she spent with him, he constantly managed to surprise her with his leaps of logic that were so often accurate.

Rising to her feet, T'Pol gave the captain's ready room a quick glance before pocketing the PADD that contained her mate's latest warp theories. She had retired to the ready room nearly an hour earlier, knowing that Trip would be spending that time with Commodore Archer as they continued to study the battle plan in an attempt to improve their chances. The sense of disquiet that pulsed through the bond she shared with her mate continued to trouble her, and she found herself echoing his concern.

She strode through the door leading to the bridge, noting with some surprise that the only member of the Alpha shift present was Lieutenant Devereux. As T'Pol stepped onto the command deck, the lieutenant rose from the command chair and moved toward her station.

"Commodore Archer, Captain Tucker to the bridge," the Vulcan ordered as she walked toward her own station. "Shipwide announcement," T'Pol continued. "Stand by for warp."

Less than a minute later, the hiss of the turbolift door opening informed her that Commodore Archer had arrived, and she could feel the warm touch of Trip's *katra* as he approached. He was still worried over the battle plan, and she winced slightly at the force of his concern. Giving him a subtle look, she frowned almost imperceptibly. Quickly, his control reasserted itself and he gave her a sheepish half-smile of apology.

"Contact *Hyperion*," the commodore ordered as he took a seat in the command chair. It was clearly an instinctive action, and embarrassment washed across the older man's face the moment he realized what he had done. Amusement pulsed through the bond as Trip grinned at the commodore.

"Comfortable enough for ya, sir?" Trip asked with a smirk. T'Pol quirked her eyebrow at the joking tone in his voice as she sat at her station.

"Sorry," Archer replied as he stood. He gave her mate a slight smile. "Old habits die hard."

Before Trip could reply, the main viewer came alive, transforming into an image of Commander Joseph Rivers, the commanding officer of UES *Hyperion*. The man had a sour expression on his face but, in her admittedly brief interactions with Rivers, T'Pol had discovered that this was a normal state for him. Trip had once commented that the man looked like he wasn't regular enough; but, even with her ongoing attempts to comprehend the human vernacular, T'Pol remained confused as to exactly what that meant.

Which, she supposed, had probably been Trip's intent.

"Commodore," Rivers said in greeting.

"Time's up," Archer began. "What's your status, Commander?"

"Hsiao is finishing up now, sir." The commander glowered at something off the screen. His curious reactions caused T'Pol to raise an eyebrow in curiosity; her mate seemed to notice and shot her a knowing glance. "The last estimate was five minutes."

"Get him on the line," Commodore Archer ordered before glancing at the chronometer he wore and frowning. He gave Trip a look.

"Lieutenant Hsiao here." As expected, there was no visual image of the lieutenant, and his voice sounded slightly strained.

"I need a status report, Mister Hsiao," the commodore declared. "We launch in *exactly* four minutes. Will *Hyperion* be ready then?"

"Yes, sir." Hsiao paused. "Sir, some of these upgrades are jury-rigged. It'd be better if—"

"Say no more," Archer interrupted. He looked at Trip. "I need *Hyperion* at Acheron, Trip."

"Understood, sir." T'Pol could feel her mate's suppressed concern over the lieutenant's fate and once more marveled at the various emotional connections that humans could make with one another. A Vulcan commander would not express the sort of worry over a crewmember that Trip did.

"Commander Rivers." The commodore frowned slightly. "I'm temporarily assigning Lieutenant Hsiao to your command," he said.

Out of the corner of her eye, T'Pol noticed Lieutenant Devereux straighten slightly in her seat and wondered about it. The two lieutenants were normally close friends but, in recent weeks, the Vulcan had noticed a strange tension between them that she couldn't quite explain. Trip had theorized a failed romantic entanglement between them, but had provided no verifiable proof to back up his hypothesis. Despite this lack of proof, T'Pol had long since learned to trust her mate's instincts when it came to human behavior.

"Aye, sir," Rivers replied. If anything, his expression soured even more, prompting T'Pol to wonder if perhaps the commander had personal or professional difficulties with Lieutenant Hsiao. Archer nodded once before turning his attention to the communications officer.

"Fleetwide channel, Lieutenant," he said. The commodore gave Trip a look that T'Pol wasn't able to identify. Once more, she sensed Trip's worry swelling up within him, but this time, he managed to keep it mostly suppressed.

"Channel open, sir," Devereux announced. The main viewer had split-screened into nine distinct images of the ship commanders of the Sixth Fleet. Archer shifted his stance slightly, inhaling softly and holding his breath for less than a second.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the commodore said as he drew himself upright. "I'd like to address the fleet."

"Shipwide channel," Trip ordered Lieutenant Devereux. On the main viewer, T'Pol could see the other commanding officers relating the same instructions. A moment passed as each ship signaled that they were ready. Archer drew in another breath before speaking once more.

"Officers and crewmen of the Sixth Fleet," he began, "we are about to embark upon a great crusade, the likes of which humanity hasn't seen in over a century." Archer began pacing as he spoke. "We face a well trained, well equipped and battle hardened foe," he continued, "and he will fight savagely for every cubic meter."

As the commodore spoke, T'Pol studied the assembled bridge crew discreetly. All eyes save hers were riveted upon Commodore Archer and, although her ability to read human body language was questionable, she suspected that many were deriving courage from the commodore's words.

"Humanity has lost much since war was thrust upon us," Archer declared, his voice strong. "Though we did not ask for this war, we have faced it with courage and resolve even in the face of terrible loss. Many of us have lost friends and loved ones in the fires of this conflict, yet *none* of us have lost the will to win." He paused, giving the bridge crew of *Endeavour* a confident smile. "And win we shall." A low rumble of approval answered his words, and T'Pol quirked an eyebrow at it. "The eyes of Earth are upon us. The hopes and prayers of freedom-loving people everywhere accompany us as we stride forward to meet the Enemy." The commodore smiled broadly. "Together, we will turn the tide of this war. Together, we will show the galaxy what it means to be human!"

T'Pol winced at the resounding cheer that followed Archer's words. Apart from herself, Trip and the commodore himself, every member of the bridge crew were loudly exulting over Archer's words. At a glance, she could tell that a similar action was taking place upon the other ships in the Fleet. *Humans*,

T'Pol thought with a mental smirk. An inspirational speech such as this would have been pointless on a Vulcan craft, and a Vulcan commander would never have considered it necessary.

Despite her attempt to remain unmoved, however, T'Pol realized that the commodore's words *were* stirring.

"I have full confidence in your courage and devotion to duty," Archer continued as the cheers began to lessen. "And I know that wishing you good luck is unnecessary. Instead, I'm going to wish you one other thing." The commodore's smile hardened, inexplicably reminding T'Pol of his personality during the Expanse mission. "Good hunting," he said grimly.

"Stand by for warp," Trip ordered as he took his seat in the command chair. As he did, Commodore Archer shifted slightly, eyes fixed on the pilot's station. A wave of amusement washed through the bond that she shared with Trip, but T'Pol was unable to determine exactly who was the source of it. "Commodore," her mate said with a quick glance in her direction, "would you like to take the helm?" Archer's quick look of surprise to Trip caused the captain's smile to broaden into a grin. "That is," Tucker continued, "if you still remember how to pilot."

"Don't mind if I do," the commodore replied as he stepped forward to relieve Ensign Jefferson. For a moment, the helmsman hesitated, but at Trip's nod, relinquished his seat without comment.

"Try to keep from scratching the paint, sir," Tucker said, still grinning. The commodore shot him a look of amused annoyance before returning his full attention to the controls before him. With practiced ease, Archer's fingers flew across the console as he input commands. A subtle vibration began pulsing through the deck plates as *Endeavour's* engines came online. Maneuvering thrusters fired, pushing the ship from the enclosing drydock, and the commodore fed additional power into the engine. *Endeavour* slowly accelerated, clearing the drydock within seconds.

A chime sounded from Lieutenant Devereux's board and she gave it a quick glance before looking up to meet Trip's questioning look.

"All ships reporting ready," she informed the captain. Tucker nodded before giving T'Pol a quick glance; in that moment, the Vulcan could feel his still suppressed concern about the coming operation. She gave him a discreet nod, hoping that it would reassure him. Whatever was to happen, they would face it together. He gave her an equally circumspect smile in return before turning his attention back to the commodore seated at the helm.

"Mister Archer," Trip said to the visible amusement of the bridge staff, "take us to warp." With a slight smile on his own face, the commodore input commands. The ambient hum of *Endeavour's* engines spiked as the ship surged forward.

They were on their way.

ACT TWO

They were minutes from arrival.

Leaning back in her command chair, Captain Erika Hernandez drew in a steadying breath. Discomfort pulsed through her as she gave the junior lieutenant manning the tactical board a discreet glance. This would be the first time since *Columbia* had launched that Hernandez had gone into action without Commander Cross at TAC and, though she didn't want to admit it, she wasn't comfortable with his absence.

A part of Erika was proud that her exec had been given command of the *Triton* for the duration of this op; when the previous commander of the old *Neptune*-class had been diagnosed with stomach cancer, it had been to Commander Cross that the commodore had turned. It spoke volumes about Aidan's command capability that Starfleet Command had put him in charge of a ship that he had never before set foot on mere hours before they would launch for a massive combat campaign.

At the same time, however, Erika was concerned what it would mean for her first officer's career. While it was an entirely legal transfer – Cross held the appropriate rank and had originally served aboard a *Neptune*-class before his assignment to *Columbia* – the rapidity of the orders absolutely reeked of patronage. Commodore Burnside Clapp had been Cross' first commanding officer and the two men still maintained a close friendship. No matter where Aidan served after *Triton*, some members of Starfleet would probably whisper that he hadn't quite earned his rank. Rumors like that could destroy a career, and Hernandez prayed that Cross wouldn't have to face that sort of thing.

For the time being, though, she was content knowing that Aidan and *Triton* had *Columbia's* back.

"Tactical alert," she ordered, and Lieutenant Kobasew nodded in acknowledgment of the instruction. Around them, lights dimmed as the weapon systems and defensive suites sucked up energy. Erika shook off a sense of *deja vu* as she turned her attention to her acting first officer. "Fleet status?" she asked, and Lieutenant Commander Jansen looked up from the Science board.

"Combat wedge," the lieutenant commander relayed. "*Athena* and *Invincible* have taken point." Jansen consulted her scans. "*Prometheus* and *Odysseus* moving into position. Receiving instructions from *Indefatigable* now." Once more, Hernandez shook her head slightly at the oddity of Commodore Burnside Clapp: despite the proven reliability of *Enterprise*-class ships, the man preferred to command from the deck of an obsolete *Neptune*-class. The *Indefatigable* had been the commodore's flagship for nearly six years now, and it had been from the bridge of that ship that he had commanded the ultimately unnecessary planetary defense force against the second Xindi incursion.

"Incoming transmission," Lieutenant Benitez announced from the communication board. Touching her earpiece, the lieutenant listened for an additional moment before looking to Erika. "Uploading new telemetry from *Stockholm*," the COM officer stated before tapping several keys on her console. A chirp sounded.

On the main viewscreen, a tactical display appeared. It was a two-dimensional display of the Acheron system, with Romulan ships highlighted and identified by their class. Hernandez found herself glowering at the image as the hairs on the back of her neck started to stand up. For the duration of the journey, the fleet and ship commanders had been studying the transmissions from *Stockholm* with competing

hope and concern. The optimists were convinced that the Romulans were making a serious tactical mistake, while the pessimists were worried about a trap.

Erika counted herself among the latter group.

At a glance, she could see that there were four warbirds circling the drydock. At least sixteen birds of prey were prowling the system in groups of four, and twice that number of drones were attached to the patrolling ships. One of the groups of patrol ships was in the vicinity of Second Fleet's arrival point, and, as Hernandez studied the data, two of the birds of prey were abruptly highlighted by another bracket.

"Receiving targeting package from *Indy*," Lieutenant Kobasew said from the tactical board. He cracked his knuckles in anticipation of the coming engagement, and Erika winced at the sound. Before she could comment, a chirp from the COM panel drew her attention.

"This is Fleet Command to all ships." Commodore Burnside Clapp's voice was calming. "Revert to sublight on my signal." Seconds later, a loud chime sounded and Erika's senior helmsman, Lieutenant du Bois, dropped them from warp.

It had to be an impressive sight: ten ships slowing from warp speed in perfect formation at the same moment. *Athena* and *Invincible*, both *Neptune*-class, were in the very forefront of the armada, with a pair of *Daedalus*-class ships less than a dozen kilometers behind them. *Columbia* was at the heart of the arrangement, two more *Daedalus*-class ships on her flanks which were in turned flanked by a pair of *Neptunes*. The last of the old *Neptunes* in the fleet, UES *Triton*, was directly aft of *Columbia*. Seen from above, the pattern looked like an arrowhead and was designed to maximize the firepower of the taskforce.

Within seconds of slowing from warp speed, the formation was engaging Romulan forces. Caught unprepared by the sudden arrival of the Starfleet ships, the quartet of Romulan birds of prey broke into a spiraling dive as phase cannon fire and photonic torpedoes slammed into their intended targets with explosive results. Two of the patrolling drones were destroyed instantly, followed quickly by a third as one of *Columbia's* torpedoes ripped into its hull with devastating force.

Even as the Romulan ships were scattering in surprised panic, the combat wedge was breaking apart into previously designated hunter-killer teams. Flanked by the *Indefatigable* and *Athena*, *Columbia* banked in tight pursuit of the quartet of birds of prey. Torpedoes flashed out from the trio of Starfleet ships, detonating against the nearly invisible force screen that surrounded one of the birds of prey; as the shield generators of the ship failed under the crippling barrage, scarlet beams of phase cannon fire slashed out, burning deeply into the hull plating and slicing into the Romulan ship's superstructure. A second salvo of torpedo fire slammed into the ship, ripping it apart with flashes of atomic fire.

"Warbirds are en route," Lieutenant Commander Jansen relayed from the Science board, and Erika nodded. Everything was going as planned.

"How many?" Hernandez asked as she observed a second bird of prey shudder under concentrated fire.

"Only one." Jansen paused as she studied her readouts. "A second is moving to engage Fifth Fleet." That tracked with the battle plan, and was the reason for the Fifth's arrival at the opposite end of the system. *Appear at points which the enemy must hasten to defend*, Hernandez quoted mentally.

"And the other two?" Erika already suspected the answer and was not surprised when her acting first officer spoke.

"Remaining in defensive orbit over the drydock," Jansen stated.

"Incoming from Fleet Commander," Lieutenant Benitez declared from the communications board. "Shift target to incoming warbird."

"Acknowledge," Hernandez ordered. "Helm, let's go say hello. Tactical, full barrage as soon as we're in range."

"Aye, ma'am," the two men replied simultaneously. Under du Bois' hand, *Columbia* banked hard and accelerated toward the rapidly approaching warbird, still flanked by *Athena* and *Indefatigable*. As the fastest of the three, *Columbia* quickly pulled ahead. Mere seconds passed before the warbird was in weapons range and began exchanging shots with the NC-02. *Columbia* shook as her shields absorbed massive amounts of incoming fire. A trio of torpedoes raced through the void toward the NC-02 but were torn apart by *Columbia's* newly installed point-defense weapon systems.

"Fire!" Hernandez ordered, and Lieutenant Kobasew obeyed without question. *Columbia* shuddered as photonic torpedoes screamed from her launch tubes. Phase cannon fire splashed against the shields, momentarily sketching out the nearly invisible force screen. The two ships roared by one another, mere kilometers apart. Weapons barking fire at near point-blank range, the two rocked under their onslaughts as they began circling one another like hungry sharks.

As *Columbia* shook under the concentrated assault and alarms shrieked warnings, Erika glanced at the sensor feed installed in front of her command chair. *Stay focused on us*, she urged the warbird. *Pay no attention to the other ships*.

To her surprise, the Romulan commander seemed to obey. As the warbird continued to pound away at *Columbia*, the lethal combination of *Athena* and *Indefatigable* pounced. Phase cannon fire and photonic torpedoes slammed into the warbird's aft section, punching through its already weakened shields and ripping into the superstructure with fierce explosions that vaporized metal and flesh. Huge chunks of polarized hull plating were torn free in the blast and sent tumbling into the void.

"Ha!" Kobasew laughed as the warbird finally responded to the arrival of the other two ships. It was too late, though, and the three Starfleet ships pounded the Romulan craft mercilessly, systematically ripping it to shreds.

"Status of the other warbirds?" Erika demanded, and Jansen glanced up from her board, eyes wide.

"One is on intercept vector!" the lieutenant commander revealed urgently.

"Break off," Hernandez ordered quickly. "Tactical, reorient weapons." *Columbia's* engines began to growl as Lieutenant du Bois fed them more power and sent the NC-02 into another hard bank. "Communications, inform Fleet Commander." The second warbird loomed ominously in the sensor feed, and Erika found herself swallowing the concern that was building in her throat. Everything was proceeding exactly as it should, and that bothered her.

A lot.

Glancing quickly at the sensor feed, she could tell that Second Fleet was continuing to brutalize the Romulans. Even with the arrival of a second quartet of the birds of prey and their attached drones, damage to the fleet remained minimal. The UES *Invincible* under Commander Sitter was living up to its name as the venerable *Neptune*-class led *Ardent*, *Prometheus* and *Odysseus* into the thick of the fray, disrupting an attempt by the Romulans to regroup with brutal fire. *Triton* was the only ship in the fleet suffering any significant damage and, from the radiological scans, it appeared to have been inflicted by either friendly fire or a launch tube explosion; despite the damage, however, the ship was still in the fight as it followed the two *Daedalus*-class ships in its combat wing.

This is too easy, Erika mused before turning her attention back to the incoming warbird.

She hoped she was wrong.



It just wasn't right.

Standing in front of the holo-table, Jonathan Archer studied it intently, frowning at the relative ease with which Second and Fifth Fleet were tearing through the Romulan defensive network. Damage remained minimal, with only the UES *Triton* of Second having suffered significant damage. Six birds of prey had been destroyed in the opening seconds of the assault, and the debris of twice that many drones was already scattered throughout the system. At least one warbird was drifting, powerless and no longer a threat.

A frown appeared on Jon's face as he scrolled across the holographic image of the ongoing engagement. The Romulans were responding slowly to the assault, almost as if they had been caught completely by surprise at the sudden appearance of the Starfleet ships, something that seemed categorically impossible. Unless Romulan sensors were far worse than intelligence suspected, they *should* have been able to detect the two incoming fleets.

"Time on target?" Archer asked grimly as he continued to study the display on the holo-table. Once more, his attention was drawn to the drydock that was *Endeavour's* target. A single warbird was guarding it, along with several dozen armed drones. Ten satellite-sized objects orbited the construction facility; preliminary scans seemed to indicate that they were automated defense systems.

"Five minutes," Lieutenant Reynolds replied from his station. Like the other four members of the combat control team, the lieutenant was wearing a headset that would connect him to the two ships that he was to direct during the operation. "Comm check," Reynolds ordered the rest of his team before inputting commands into the console in front of him. "*Endeavour*, *Horizon* signal ready," he said a moment later.

"*Achilles*, *Gallant* ready," Lieutenant Esque announced.

"*Hyperion*, *Puissant* standing by," Ensign Dill stated.

"*Champion, Telemachus* standing by." Lieutenant Junior Grade McNurlen didn't look up from her board as she spoke.

"*Charlemagne, Dauntless* are green," Ensign Lunceford declared.

Jon was barely aware of the quiet reports from his team as he stared at the updated telemetry being received from the Starfleet ships engaged in the battle. The UES *Triumph*, one of Fifth Fleet's *Neptunes*, was reporting heavy damage. One of Second Fleet's *Daedalus*-class ships – *Prometheus* – was experiencing wide scale failures of the port nacelle due to enemy fire.

"Two minutes," Reynolds stated into the brief silence, and Jon looked up, his expression bleak.

"Mark your targets," he instructed. "*Endeavour* to focus fire on the warbird." Reynolds nodded. "I want covering fire from destroyers," Jon continued, momentarily allowing himself to marvel at the absurdity of even considering a *Daedalus*-class to be a "destroyer." Originally intended to be a joint colonization/exploration ship, the *Daedalus*-class was gradually turning into the standard ship-of-the-line for Starfleet as the *Icelands* and *Neptunes* were destroyed or heavily damaged. Crews of the awkward-looking ships had even begun to delight in the sheer unattractiveness of the hull design, claiming that "ugly was beautiful."

"One minute," Lieutenant Reynolds declared, and Archer drew in a steadying breath. *Here we go*, he told himself.

Fifty-five seconds later, *Endeavour* and Sixth Fleet slowed from warp. Almost instantly, the rumble of photonic torpedoes being launched echoed through the deck plating, and Jon studied the results on his display. Scarlet phase cannon beams flashed out, slicing into the protective force screen that surrounded the warbird with no apparent effect; point-defense weapons from the Romulan ship began spewing fire at the incoming torpedoes, ripping them apart before they could reach their target. As the warbird began to accelerate toward the approaching Starfleet ships, the automated defense satellites began orienting toward the human force.

"Destroyers," Archer said sharply, "take out those satellites!"

Endeavour abruptly banked to the right, and the sudden shift in direction pressed Jon down in his seat as the inertial dampeners struggled to compensate. Torpedoes screamed toward the NC-06, and the space around the Starfleet ship was suddenly alive with pyrotechnics as automated countermeasures came alive. Point-defense x-ray lasers savaged the incoming ordnance, as *Endeavour* returned fire with its phase cannons. For the briefest of moments, Archer was distracted by the sheer firepower being unleashed by the two warships at one another: in that moment, he was inexplicably reminded of ancient seagoing battleships exchanging brutal broadsides.

On his screen, Jon could see the four *Daedalus*-class ships lumbering toward the drydock, weapons spitting fire as they moved to engage the defensive satellites. The five *Neptunes* assigned to Sixth Fleet were maneuvering as well as they concentrated fire on the unmanned drones that swarmed around the fleet. One of the drones abruptly exploded under the bracketed fire from the *Neptunes*, and debris from its destruction slammed into a second one, sending it spinning uncontrollably into the void.

A flash of light momentarily blinded *Endeavour's* exterior sensor array, causing the holo-table to lose realtime telemetry.

"What the hell was that?" Archer demanded as the table image began to reset.

"*Prometheus'* warp core breached," Lieutenant Esque revealed grimly, and Jon glowered at the table. Fifty men and women, gone in the blink of an eye. He couldn't help but wonder how many of them had children back on Earth or Alpha Centauri, or any of the other human colonies out there.

Endeavour suddenly shook hard, knocking Ensigns Dill and Lunceford from their seats. In the distance, Archer could hear shipboard alarms shrieking, but he pushed his concern down. There was still a job to do. *Focus on the big picture*, he reminded himself as he fought down the urge to head for the bridge. Glancing at the holo-table, he frowned at the continuing stalemate. Five of the defensive satellites were gone, but *Achilles* had suffered heavy damage and was even now limping away. A trio of drones swarmed around the heavy *Daedalus*-class ship, harassing it with disruptor fire that sliced into the already weakened hull plating.

Steady streams of phase cannon fire ripped into one of the drones, and *Horizon* raced forward to aid *Achilles*, engines burning bright. Despite the situation, Jon found himself smiling slightly at the almost heroic idiocy of the crew of the *Neptune*-class. Since receiving a field commission at the rank of commander, Paul Mayweather had turned into an unlikely Starfleet officer with a growing reputation as something of a maverick. In the four combat engagements that *Horizon* had participated in since Mayweather assumed command, the crew of that ship – ex-Boomers all – had already become the most heavily decorated in all of Starfleet.

"Damn it, Trip," Archer muttered as *Endeavour* exchanged another volley of fire with the warbird. The two ships continued to circle one another, trading shots as they maneuvered to gain better angles of fire. "Kill this sonuvabitch!" Jon growled as *Endeavour* shook under retaliatory fire.

To Archer's surprise, the Starfleet ship began to spit a steady stream of photonic torpedoes. Instead of being directed at the warbird, though, they seemed to have no target as they raced into the silent void. For a heartbeat, Jon suspected a failure of the targeting computers, but that theory vanished the moment he realized that each of the warheads was beginning to arc back toward the warbird, perfectly staggered to arrive at the same moment. Too late, the commander of the Romulan ship realized what was happening, and eighteen Mark VI photonic torpedoes slammed into the warbird's shields within nanoseconds of one another.

A steady stream of phase cannon fire sliced into the Romulan ship's hull as its shields collapsed under the unexpected onslaught. Remora torpedoes raced from *Endeavour's* launch tubes, breaking apart into multiple and independently targeting warheads that ravaged the warbird's hull with smaller explosions. Large slabs of hull plating were torn free or simply vaporized under the heat of *Endeavour's* guns. Leaking atmosphere, the Romulan warship twisted into a desperate dive to evade incoming fire.

"Get *Achilles* out of there!" Esque was shouting into her headset, and Jon's breath caught at the level of damage being detected on the large *Daedalus*-class. Pouncing on the weakened ship, the surviving drones spat steady streams of disruptor fire at its exposed superstructure. Wreathed in fire, *Achilles* suddenly shuddered as something exploded from within. Bodies were sent tumbling into the hard vacuum as great chunks of burning hull plating snapped apart.

"Get to the life pods!" Jon urged the crew of the doomed ship, already knowing it was too late. A heavily damaged drone darted forward, slamming into the engineering hull of *Achilles* with crushing force. Moments later, the entire secondary hull exploded with a fiery flash that sent massive slabs of

debris spinning into the immense spherical command section. A series of secondary and tertiary detonations systematically tore the primary hull apart, spilling even more bodies into the unyielding vacuum.

There were no life pods.

"Stay focused!" Reynolds snapped at the two wide-eyed ensigns who were staring at the holo-table with horror on their faces. Both jumped at the harshness of his order, but immediately obeyed, turning their full attention to the consoles before them.

"Cruisers to shift fire to drydock," Jon ordered as he watched the Romulan warbird begin to break apart under *Endeavour's* unceasing fire. "*Endeavour* to shift fire to drydock." Once more, he pushed back the nagging worry that something wasn't right.

Everything was proceeding according to plan.



Everything was proceeding according to plan.

Despite this fact, Subcommander D'deridex found himself shifting awkwardly as he stared at the holo-tank that dominated the battle-control deck. Stretching from floor to ceiling, the tank was an entirely enclosed display that presented a three dimensional outline of the system that Rihannsu star charts referred to as LV-426. Brightly colored images represented the starships currently engaged in combat; red for Rihannsu, green for Terran. It was a technological marvel that utilized dozens of carefully placed relays throughout the system to present a clear picture of the ongoing battle. At any other time, D'deridex would have gladly studied the tank without even attempting to conceal his abject fascination for it.

Currently, however, he was too busy attempting to hide his discomfort.

With each passing second, loyal Rihannsu warriors were dying in what could ultimately prove to be a senseless waste. Males and females that had served with honor and distinction were being sent to their deaths with no consideration for their mates or families. D'deridex swallowed as another red image winked out of existence, and he shifted his feet slightly.

"You appear troubled, *Erei'riov* D'deridex," Admiral Valdore said from where he stood in front of the enclosed holo-tank. His hands clasped behind his back, the admiral turned his attention away from the holo-tank. There was no condemnation in his expression, merely polite curiosity.

"We are losing many good warriors, sir," D'deridex pointed out cautiously. He still wasn't sure what he had done to earn the prestigious assignment of serving as the admiral's adjutant, but in the weeks since he had been assigned to relate false information to the Terrans, D'deridex had grown to enjoy the role. In the twenty-one *eisae* that had passed since that moment, the subcommander had learned more about strategy and tactics than he had previously learned in his entire career.

To his absolute surprise, Admiral Valdore had assumed the role of teacher and mentor with apparent eagerness. Every question that D'deridex had asked about the operation, the admiral had answered, going so far as to explain the more esoteric elements of the strategic plan. Valdore had displayed an almost paternal pride when the subcommander showed his own skill in the area.

It was discomfoting, actually.

"A commander who is afraid to put his forces into harm's way has already been defeated," the admiral stated in reply to D'deridex's question. He gestured toward the holo-tank. "These officers and crews die for a reason."

"What reason is that, *Daise'Khre'Riov*?" A flicker of sadness crossed the admiral's face for a heartbeat, but was gone almost before D'deridex saw it.

"They are bait for our trap," Valdore said as he refocused his attention on the battle. "An effective trap requires believable risks. Too few defenders, and the Terrans would see it as the trap that it is. Too many, and they would not risk their forces." He began walking around the holo-tank, eyes still on the representations of the battle within it. "It is probable that they *suspect* a trap, but there is sufficient motivation for them to launch the assault despite these suspicions." The admiral frowned at the results of one such engagement before continuing. "Thus, these loyal warriors must be sacrificed to make the trap a believable one." He gave D'deridex a sidelong look. "You disagree." It wasn't a question, and the subcommander did not treat it as such.

"I do," he replied carefully. In his short time with the admiral, he had quickly learned that Valdore abhorred dissembling nearly as much as he hated disrespect. "We have sufficient ships present to break the Terran assault, yet we do not deploy them." D'deridex swallowed as another image representing a Rihanssu warship winked out abruptly. "Instead, we continue to allow loyal warriors to die."

"We do not strike, because it is not time." Valdore returned his focus to the holo-tank, frowning at what he saw. "If we strike too soon, the advantage of surprise is lost," he pointed out. "And the dead you speak of died for no reason." Abruptly, the admiral looked up with a scowl. "You know these things," he accused, anger dripping off his words. "To command effectively, *Erei'riov*, you must be without mercy. At your command, warriors will be sent to their deaths, planets will burn, and the galaxy will be torn asunder, all in the name of *Empire*." D'deridex blinked at the hint of contempt in the admiral's voice, but did not interrupt. "Emotional weaknesses such as mercy or compassion or loyalty have no place on this battlefield, and you must cast them aside." Valdore pinned him with a cold look. "Victory requires no explanation," he said in reminder, quoting one of the oldest Rihanssu axioms about war as he spoke. "Defeat allows for none."

"I apologize for my failure, *Daise'Khre'Riov*," D'deridex replied, appropriately chastised. Valdore grunted.

"Do not apologize," he ordered. "Instead, learn from the mistakes of the past." D'deridex frowned at that, wondering what sorts of mistakes the admiral could be referencing. Before he could ask, Valdore spoke again. "This ship," he said as he highlighted one of the Terran vessels, "is unique in appearance. What is it?"

"*Endeavour*," D'deridex identified, pronouncing the unfamiliar ship name with subtle emphasis. "Its commander was once the chief engineer of *Enterprise*."

"Tucker." The admiral glowered darkly for a moment, and D'deridex gave him a startled look. From the venom in Valdore's voice, one would assume that he had had personal experience with the Terran officer. "*Enarrain Archer* will be aboard this craft." Visceral hatred rolled off the admiral as he spoke the human commodore's name, causing D'deridex some surprise. Never before had he heard Valdore speak with such raw emotion. It was gone almost instantly, and the subcommander wondered if he had truly witnessed it. "I think I shall dispatch *Ael'Riov Chulak's* ship to engage this craft when the time is right," Valdore declared with a tight smile, a sinister glint in his eyes as he spoke. "Regardless of that outcome, it will be ultimately satisfying."

It was an understandable comment on Valdore's part. Since even before the Terrans launched their expedition to retake LV-426, *Ael'Riov Chulak* had been urging alterations to the tactical plan. Chulak, the son of a senator and with clear political aspirations of his own, argued in favor of a more aggressive tactical assault; this had led to a number of tense disagreements between the two senior officers. It was only the Senate's continual demand for success that led the commander to even consider questioning the admiral's battle plan.

With the dissolution of the Delphic Expanse, the timetable for reconquest of the heretical Vulcans had been pushed forward. Though they concealed it behind perfectly simulated patriotic zeal, many senators were clearly frightened by the loss of the buffer zone that separated them from their ancestral brothers. The discovery that *Terrans* were responsible for the destruction of the Expanse only stoked the fires of debate into a fever pitch. As humans continued to interfere with sector politics, key members of the Senate began to perceive the Terrans as a potential threat. Displaying an uncanny ability to forge alliances with their enemies, the humans seemed poised on the brink of uniting the entire sector in a loose confederation that could conceivably oppose the Rihannsu invasion fleet.

"If he survives," D'deridex suggested of Chulak, "you could assign him to deal with the Xin'di." It was a duty that no officer truly desired, as it required interacting with the volatile reptiles while encased in the specially modified cyber-suits that many of the marines had taken to calling "suicide shells." Negotiations with the Xin'di remained difficult as, contrary to their initial appearance, the reptiles had proven to be canny diplomats. At every stage, they resisted sharing their transmat technology.

Surprisingly, Valdore gave him a sharp look, almost as if he had been startled by the notion. Not for the first time, the subcommander wondered at the mysterious and secret communications that had taken place between the visiting Xin'di and the admiral on numerous occasions. It was due to Valdore's interference that several military plans to simply seize the transmat technology from the Xin'di had been discarded. The admiral clearly saw the Xin'di as integral to the overall war plan, even if no one else within the ranks did. For a moment, D'deridex was afraid that he had overstepped himself.

The moment passed.

"I am more inclined to assign you to that duty," Valdore rumbled, a cryptic expression on his face. D'deridex blinked in slight surprise; from the admiral's body language, he clearly did not see the assignment as a punishment detail. *What am I missing?* D'deridex wondered.

"I am honored, sir," he replied by rote. Admiral Valdore smirked then, a clear indication that he recognized D'deridex's hesitation for what it was.

"Have the transmitters brought online," the admiral ordered as he leaned forward to study the holo-tank with narrowed eyes. "And inform the fleet to stand by for maneuvers. It is nearly time for them to strike."

"I obey, *Daise'Khre'Riov*," D'deridex said in reply before turning toward the communication panel. He gave the holo-tank one last glance.

Everything was about to change.



Nothing had changed.

Not for the first time, Charles Tucker found himself grateful for the Vulcan discipline he had learned from T'Pol. His stomach clenched tightly as he stared in horror at the image of the UES *Achilles* breaking apart on the main viewer, yet somehow he managed to retain his clarity of thought. It was both terrifying and exciting to realize that he was capable of making rational decisions in the midst of such tragedy, that he wasn't too horrified to forget that he was the captain and still had a job to do.

Out of the corner of his eye, Trip could see T'Pol reacting to the image on the screen with her usual facade of Vulcan dispassion. To those who did not know her as he did, she seemed almost bored or perhaps even indifferent to the deaths being displayed on the viewer, but Tucker could feel her anger and sadness at the lives lost through the magical bond that never ceased to amaze him. Sensing his morbid thoughts, she gave him a glance. Warmth washed over him in that moment, immediately reminding him of sunny July days from his youth in Florida.

Almost reflexively, his mind flashed to memories of the night before. She had come to him without warning, joining him in bed for long hours of slow but passionate lovemaking that remained indelibly stamped upon his memory. That had, after all, been her intent: if they were to die today, T'Pol had wanted them both to carry glorious memories into whatever the afterlife held for them. It had been a ridiculously romantic sentiment coming from a Vulcan, but Trip found himself clinging to those memories with every gram of his willpower.

He wasn't going to let this war destroy him.

"Incoming transmission from Fleet Command," Lieutenant Devereux announced, shattering the moment and causing Trip's focus to snap back fully to the present. To his mild surprise, he realized that even in that moment of reflection, his attention had never really wavered from the sensor feed installed in front of his command chair. It was yet another example of the continuing oddities of his life that he had learned to take for granted, even when he knew that he should be worried. There was no good explanation why he was abruptly able to multi-task in such a way, or why he was in better physical shape now than he had been fifteen years earlier. He had decided to blame it on T'Pol's influence, even though he knew she was just as unable to explain it herself.

"Shift fire to drydock," Devereux continued, relaying the instructions from Commodore Archer's team. A steady stream of data crawled across the sensor feed that was installed in front of the command chair,

and Tucker found himself frowning darkly at the additional instructions from the commodore. Part of him understood the necessity of relaying certain sensitive orders only to the commanding officer of the ship via the sensor feed; it was entirely possible, after all, that the fleet commander would have to order a ship to its doom in order to accomplish the strategic objective, and relaying such instructions through the ship's communications officer was an effective way to cause panic. That didn't stop Trip from experiencing a flash of guilt over having information that the rest of the crew – sans T'Pol, of course – didn't have.

"Send: acknowledge," he ordered the COM officer before giving T'Pol a quick glance. She recognized the unspoken cue and responded instantly.

"I am detecting forty-eight mass signatures in orbit around the drydock," T'Pol revealed instantly. She leaned forward and began looking through the viewer on her station. "Tentatively identified as holographically cloaked mines."

"Mister Eisler," Trip said coolly as he began scrolling through the data on his personal sensor feed. "Remoras are green."

Surprisingly, the tactical officer merely grunted in response, and Tucker shot him a look. Lieutenant Commander Eisler was glowering at something on his display, and, as if sensing Trip's eyes, glanced up. Instantly, Tucker's mental alarms began sounding at the ex-MACO's grim expression.

"Sir," Eisler growled, "the Romulans are targeting the bridges of our ships."

"Can you confirm?" Trip asked T'Pol. Tucker's eyes bounced back to the data display before him, and he pushed back the concern that was threatening to bubble forth. Shields were holding at under sixty percent, but a concentrated burst of fire could theoretically punch through them at a single location and inflict massive damage. Once more, he found himself lamenting the fact that a ship class designed for exploration had been forced into a combat role; tactically, it made no sense to put the command deck on the very top of the saucer section where it was easily exposed to enemy fire.

At the very moment that thought occurred to him, Trip felt another piece of the explorer that he had once been slip away from him. He wished he had the time to grieve for that loss.

"Stand by," T'Pol replied to his question. Her fingers danced across her board, inputting commands with amazing speed. She looked up, an almost frown on her face. "Confirmed. UES *Dauntless* and *Charlemagne* have suffered structural damage near the bridge." Without glancing away from the display in front of him, Trip pressed the comm button on his command chair.

"Tucker to auxiliary command," he said once he heard the chirp announcing a live connection. The response was instantaneous.

"This is Ricker."

"Stand by to assume operations," Trip ordered. A thought occurred to him and tumbled from his lips before he could think about it. "Commander T'Pol will be there momentarily to assume command." He hesitated for the briefest of seconds, wondering if it was the right thing to do. Sending T'Pol to take over auxiliary command was *not* an attempt on his part to keep her safe ... was it? He needed his best

officer there to be in charge of *Endeavour* while he transferred the rest of the bridge staff out of the vulnerable bridge, and there was no one better than T'Pol.

Despite knowing that, however, he experienced a moment of doubt. T'Pol had accused him of letting his emotions dictate his decision-making in the past, and he honestly couldn't say that it *wasn't* affecting him now. Unexpectedly, Trip found himself getting angry. It was yet another reminder of why the commanding officer should not be romantically involved with a member of his crew – as if he needed such a reminder – and Trip found himself fighting to avoid glaring at the screen. *Now is not the time to start second guessing myself*, he reminded himself darkly.

"Acknowledged, sir," Lieutenant Ricker replied from auxiliary command. Retrofitted from the extra space where *Endeavour's* engineering section had been prior to the refit, the location now served as a "battle bridge" from which the ship could be commanded safely. It was also immediately adjacent to the heavily fortified command lounge in which Commodore Archer was now ensconced.

"Go," Trip ordered, noting T'Pol's expression instantly. He felt her approval, and mentally chastised himself for his momentary lapse of judgment. "Once you're set, let me know so we can begin transfer," he finished.

"Aye, Captain," she replied quickly. Another flash of self anger washed over him as she stood from her station and headed toward the turbolift, causing her to pause at the threshold and give him a quick, concerned look. Even as she was entering the lift, an ensign whose name Trip couldn't remember stepped forward and manned her station almost instantly.

"Remoras away," Eisler declared suddenly, and Trip glowered at the sensor feed. Four torpedoes rumbled from the launch tubes, splitting apart within kilometers of *Endeavour*. Even as the individually tracking warheads began homing in on their targets, another pair of the Remora torpedoes were fired. The space around the massive drydock was suddenly alive with incandescent explosions as the warheads slammed into their targets and detonated. Phase cannon fire began flashing out from the attacking ships, slicing into the outer hull of the construction facility with searing fire. Trip frowned as he studied the damage being wrought by the six ships making their attack runs. He recognized the reason immediately.

The drydock wasn't operational.

"Captain..." The ensign at the SCI board looked and sounded worried. Tucker gave her a quick nod to indicate that he was listening. "Sir, I'm detecting system wide energy spikes."

"System wide?" Trip speared the anxious-looking girl with a look. "Planetary system or throughout *Endeavour*?" Silently, he cursed himself for sending T'Pol away; if she had been manning the SCI board, he wouldn't have had to ask.

"The star system, sir." The ensign – Ling, her nameplate read – frowned at the readings. "It's everywhere." Trip blinked as he felt T'Pol's surprise at the sudden revelation; such energy spikes hadn't been there before. He inhaled sharply at an unexpected sense of motion; without having to ask, he knew that she had arrived on D Deck and was now running toward auxiliary command.

"Confirmed," Eisler declared from his board. "It looks like a tightbeam relay grid," he continued. On the main viewer, the drydock was beginning to break apart under the combined firepower of the five

Neptunes and *Endeavour*; at that moment, however, Trip felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. A tightbeam grid could only mean one thing: someone, somewhere was watching this entire engagement.

"Isolate its destination," he snapped quickly. His eyes jumped to Lieutenant Devereux. "Inform the commodore!"

"Multiple warp signatures detected!" Ensign Ling suddenly shouted, her eyes wide.

"Energy spike!" Eisler bellowed at the same time.

A second later, everything went dark.

ACT THREE

The viewscreen was dark.

"Report!" Commander T'Pol demanded as she entered the battle bridge. At a glance, she could see that the officers and crewmen manning the auxiliary stations were terrified and seconds away from total panic. The relief on Lieutenant Ricker's face as T'Pol entered was so evident that it nearly caused the Vulcan commander to stumble in surprise.

"Sensors are being jammed!" Ricker responded immediately from the Science board, and T'Pol gave the flickering viewscreen a quick glance. The image on it crackled in and out of existence, immediately reminding her of an incident many years earlier when she had served aboard the *Seleya*. Pursued by Orion raiders, Captain Voris had ordered the ship into a dense nebula to avoid combat, despite the fact that sensors were rendered virtually useless.

With quick strides, T'Pol approached the Science board and glanced over the readings crawling across the displays. She fought the urge to frown at the unreliable readings she saw there.

"How many warp signatures were detected before the jamming began?" she asked calmly.

"Thirty-six," Ricker replied grimly. She input a command; almost instantly, a sensor log appeared on the small display and T'Pol spent several seconds studying the data. Based on their mass, the sensor contacts were tentatively identified as twelve warbirds and twenty-four birds of prey. Estimated time of arrival was three minutes. The frown that T'Pol had been struggling to contain defeated her control when she glanced at the chronometer and mentally revised that estimate to one minute, thirty seconds. She retreated to the small command chair in the center of the battle bridge.

"T'Pol to bridge," she said into the comm. Trip's response was instantaneous.

"This is Tucker."

"I am in auxiliary command." T'Pol lowered herself into the captain's chair, fighting back the trepidation that always struck her when she was forced to assume command. Before Azati Prime, she would not have given it a second thought, but in the wake of that battle, she found herself nearly constantly second guessing herself. Fourteen officers and crewmembers had died because she failed them, fourteen men and women who would never see their full potential realized because she had lost herself in a drug-addled haze all in an insane attempt to experience emotion. Memory of Trip's horrified expression at her confession during their journey to Vulcan appeared in her mind's eye, and she forcibly suppressing the shame that threatened to overwhelm her. He had forgiven her – mostly – although she knew that she would never be able to forgive herself.

Never again, T'Pol declared to herself, knowing that she could never pay a penance sufficient enough to redeem herself. If she was entirely honest, it was one of the reasons she had refused Minister T'Pau's latest offer to resume her commission with the Science Directorate; the humans had accepted her with open arms following the Expanse mission and T'Pol had no intention of letting them down, even if it cost her life.

"Copy," Trip stated to her report. "I'm transferring command to you now. Stand by." T'Pol inhaled through her nostrils and exhaled through her mouth as she focused on control. The fleet was depending upon her. *Endeavour* was depending upon her. Commodore Archer was depending upon her.

Trip was depending upon her.

"Command transferred," she said as the sensor feed installed in front of the captain's chair suddenly lit up. "Helm, full evasive," T'Pol continued without pause. Even half-blind, *Endeavour* had a greater chance of survival while moving, particularly given the Romulan propensity for targeting *Enterprise*-class ships. The likelihood of a collision was so slim that it was negligible; most people forgot just how large space truly was.

The rumble of *Endeavour's* engines vibrated through the deck plating as the enlisted helmsman quickly obeyed her instructions. T'Pol swallowed the slight lump in her throat.

"Tactical?" she queried, her attention shifting to Lieutenant Junior Grade Melissa Kornegay. Assigned to *Endeavour* only hours before departure, the tactical officer looked more like a body builder than a woman with twin doctorates.

"Targeting arrays can't get a firm lock, ma'am," Kornegay replied sharply, annoyance and fear in her voice. "WSO is shooting blind." T'Pol frowned at the comment as *Endeavour* made an abrupt change in direction. She looked at the flickering viewscreen with barely concealed frustration. For the briefest of seconds, she could see Romulan warships...

And explosions.

"I'm reading multiple transmitters," Ricker announced grimly as she leaned over the holo-viewer. "I think they're blanketing the entire system with some sort of sensor-dampening gear," she continued. "It's canceling out our active scans." A muttered curse from her caused T'Pol to quirk an eyebrow; the Vulcan had never expected to hear such words from the lieutenant.

"We need those sensors," Kornegay said sharply from her station. Lieutenant Ricker didn't bother to respond to that beyond a single grunt. A moment passed before the science lieutenant looked toward T'Pol.

"Ma'am," Ricker said softly, "you're better qualified for this."

T'Pol blinked in surprise at the lieutenant's words before quickly nodding and standing. Mentally, she planned the commendation that she intended to write for Ricker; in T'Pol's experience, few officers – human *or* Vulcan – would willingly admit that they needed assistance in their area of expertise. That the lieutenant did displayed a level of maturity that was too rare.

Her fingers dancing across the Science board, T'Pol barely noticed Lieutenant Ricker take her place in the command chair although she did hear the lieutenant begin to issue soft commands to the helmsman. If the situation had not been so dire, T'Pol would have nearly smiled at the young woman's audacity.

Within seconds of taking the Science board, T'Pol had isolated the source of the sensor baffle; it consisted almost entirely of a rotating frequency of radiation wavelengths, tuned to Starfleet sensor and communication arrays but of an inverted frequency. The result was similar to certain noise or light-

dampening equipment that T'Pol had used in the past; by broadcasting the inverse of the sensor frequency, the Romulans effectively scrambled *Endeavour's* scanning and ship-to-ship capability.

Armed with the source of the threat, she easily input new instructions to the sensor array that would allow them to penetrate the sensor jamming. She paused for a heartbeat, momentarily confused at the similarity between the new frequencies she was utilizing and certain Vulcan military protocols that had remained virtually unchanged for centuries. The moment passed as the viewscreen suddenly snapped back to life.

Lieutenant Ricker gasped.

It took every gram of T'Pol's control to keep from doing the same as she looked up and studied the chaos that was prominently displayed on the main viewer. Wreckage from starships littered the view as Romulan reinforcements pounced upon the confused and disorganized Starfleet ships. Nacelles, torn free from destroyed *Neptunes* and *Daedalus*-classes, tumbled end over end, even as the command hull from a *Daedalus* – the UES *Charlemagne* according to its markings – self destructed with a fiery flash.

"My God," Lieutenant Kornegay whispered, horror in her voice. Her attention was riveted on her tactical board. Even as she spoke, a pair of Romulan warbirds were on a clear attack run for *Endeavour*. Instinctively, T'Pol began inputting commands into the SCI board with her right hand; the sensor arrays responded immediately and began broadcasting focused beams designed to confuse the Romulan targeting systems. With her left hand, the Vulcan began uploading revised sensor profiles of the inbound warships to the weapon system officer deep within the bowels of the ship; these updated profiles would aid the efforts of Lieutenant Hayes and his team to acquire accurate target locks.

Even as her board chirped acknowledgment of both commands, *Endeavour's* weapon systems were reorienting on the twin warbirds. Phase cannon fire slashed out, slicing into the protective energy field that surrounded the lead warship. A steady stream of photonic torpedoes began leaping from the launch tubes and surged toward the Romulan ship; most were ripped apart by the warbird's point-defense systems, but a trio exploded with negligible results.

"Evasive maneuvers!" Lieutenant Ricker ordered as T'Pol continued to divide her attention on the multiple tasks before her. *Endeavour's* engines growled as the Starfleet ship banked hard, even as the Romulan warbirds were spitting retaliative fire. Incandescent energy splashed against the shields, as several trios of torpedoes raced through the void. Automated countermeasures were deploying almost instantly, filling the space around *Endeavour* with a dazzling display of pyrotechnics. The point-defense systems began tracking and firing nanoseconds later, spewing invisible x-ray laser pulses that savaged the incoming warheads.

"Shields are down to twenty percent," Kornegay was reporting as T'Pol continued to input additional commands into her board. "Damage control parties on B Deck!"

Another distant explosion could be seen upon the main viewer and T'Pol's fingers continued their rapid dance; instantly, the source of the warp core breach was isolated, and she felt a surge of sadness at the image of the UES *Atlantis* slowly breaking apart. She found herself inexplicably glad that Trip had not yet arrived; he had liked Captain Amy Ebadi a great deal.

Endeavour shook under a second salvo of Romulan fire even as the helmsman sent the Starfleet ship into a twisting climb to evade the warbird's guns. A sharp pain suddenly lanced through T'Pol's side, and she barely managed to restrain a gasp at the sensation that wasn't hers.

On the heels of that, however, she felt a pulse of emotion that had a distinctive Trip taste to it. He was angry – no, he was furious! – and T'Pol shivered at the primal emotion that simmered within her mate. She could sense his simmering rage as an exploding conduit had badly injured Lieutenant Devereux and Ensign Jefferson.

"Incoming from Fleet Commander," Ricker suddenly announced, her attention on the data screen installed in front of the command chair. T'Pol blinked in sudden realization; the destruction of *Atlantis* meant that Rear Admiral Khanolankar, the operational commander, was also dead. Commodore Archer was in command. "Rally all forces!" Ricker continued.

Before T'Pol could respond, *Endeavour* seemed to shudder. An instant later, the hull breach alarm began to sound.



The hull breach alarm was beginning to give her a headache.

Shifting awkwardly in her radiation suit, Anna Hess glowered darkly at the screen display in front of her. Not for the first time, she silently cursed Captain Tucker's insistence that all engineers wear the bulky protective suit while on duty. Part of her understood his reasoning behind the order, especially after the hard call he had been forced to make at Thor's Cradle, but the part of her that actually had to wear the damned thing wanted to knock some sense into her old chief. Whoever had designed them had clearly never tried to actually work in them.

"Damage Control teams to B Deck," she ordered as the data crawled across the screen in front of her. She shifted her feet once more as she tried to find a more comfortable stance, but the uncomfortable tightness around her waist didn't abate. *This must be what wearing a corset feels like*, she grumbled mentally as she gave the DC master display another look before glancing in the direction of the humming warp core.

It bore little resemblance to the engine that Henry Archer had designed years ago, although with close inspection, one could still see his core design at the heart of the reactor that now powered *Endeavour*. Captain Tucker's influence was even more pronounced, though, with the field displacement manifold's vertical orientation instead of the previous horizontal orientation, and the numerous ladders in place for ease of access. One of Tucker's many complaints around his fellow engineers had been that a "damned pilot had screwed up the design" of *Enterprise's* reactor.

He had made it a point to never repeat those complaints within earshot of Jonathan Archer, the pilot in question.

"Rostova to Engineering!" The ensign's voice crackled out of the DC console in front of Hess, and she snapped her attention back to it. With the COB transferring to auxiliary command, Anna had turned over normal operations to her 2IC so she could focus on directing the damage control teams, knowing that Lieutenant Riggs was more than capable of keeping the reactor operational. As much as it pained her, she'd long since admitted that the lieutenant had a better grasp of warp dynamics than she did which, for the ChEng, was embarrassing. Many of the recommendations that she had forwarded to Trip during the refit had been Riggs' ideas and had already earned him several commendations.

"This is Engineering," Hess said into the comm as she input another command into her board. Instantly, Ensign Rostova's personal locator beacon was located on F Deck, and Anna frowned at the young woman's close proximity to the starboard aft torpedo magazine.

"I have an emergency situation!" Rostova declared, causing Anna to quickly hit another button. At once, a static-filled image appeared on the monitor and Hess drew in a sharp breath.

A mangled body that she recognized as one of the STAB personnel was sprawled out just beyond the magazine accessway, still smoking from the fire that had killed her. The door itself had been blown apart, and shrapnel from its demise was everywhere. Smoke billowed out, crawling up to hug the ceiling, and horror suddenly washed over Anna. Fire itself was dangerous enough on a starship, but a blaze inside a torpedo bay?

"Need immediate backup at my location!" Rostova was shouting into her comm even as she was advancing toward the magazine. Like all damage control teams during combat operations, the ensign was wearing a modified environment suit equipped with the helmet-mounted vid-cam; it was that camera, after all, that was giving Anna the view that she currently had.

"Hold on, Nat," she ordered as she gave the DC board a quick glance. A curse bubbled up in her throat at the instant realization that Rostova was the only member of her DC teams available on F Deck; the bulk of the damage control parties were currently needed to deal with the hull breach on B Deck since it was dangerously close to the port deuterium tank. Hayes' weapons teams were responding to Rostova's alert, but the lieutenant himself was needed in the forward port armory. Another look at the real-time image caused Anna's blood to run cold.

Fires were everywhere.

Hess didn't pause as she made her decision. A single explosion in the magazine could conceivably destroy the entire ship. Despite the various safety measures, it remained a concern and would likely always be one.

"Take over," she ordered the crewman standing behind her as she bolted toward the turbolift. She was buckling the suit's helmet into place even as she entered the lift. "F Deck," Anna snapped. "Emergency override: express alpha romeo." It was a command that she had never given before; coded to her voice authorization, it caused the lift to accelerate faster than safety parameters allowed for. Her knees buckled at the abrupt lurch, and she quickly reached out to grab the hand rail as she was sent staggering.

Mere seconds passed before the lift screeched to a halt, once more throwing her against the wall even as the doors slid open. She had to duck to avoid the overhang, recognizing instantly that the lift hadn't

properly seated itself before opening the doors. Pausing only long enough to grab an extinguisher from the wall, she darted forward.

Fire alarms had finally begun sounding as she rounded the corner to see Ensign Rostova dragging an unconscious STAB crewman from the armory. The ensign's EV suit was scorched and blackened, but she seemed otherwise unhurt. At sight of Anna, Rostova's eyes widened.

"Ma'am!" the ensign said in surprise as a Roughneck wearing the distinctive black combat armor emerged from the armory; he too was dragging a wounded crewmember.

"What's the status of the fire?" Hess demanded instantly. She frowned at the spiderweb crack in Rostova's faceplate, as well as the numerous burns on the ensign's EV suit. At least one of the scorch marks was significant and had clearly caused a breach before the suit's autosealer activated. Standing this close to the ensign, Anna could also see that Rostova was having some trouble breathing as she struggled to suppress small coughs.

"Still burning," the ensign replied with a slight cough. "Fire suppression systems aren't working." The young woman started to lower the unconscious man to the ground.

"Get him clear," Anna ordered before rushing toward the damaged magazine. She frowned instantly at the apparent ineffectiveness of the fire suppression system. White foam was coating everything, but still, flames danced around the room, far too close to the stacked torpedoes for comfort. At a glance, Anna could see that the autoloader that transferred the photonic torpedoes to the delivery system in the aft-facing armory had violently self-destructed, toppling a now damaged torpedo to the deck.

Ignoring the fires, Hess darted to the upended torpedo, heart pounding. Terror turned her legs to rubber when she realized that the warhead was armed ...

And counting down.

"Seal the pressure doors!" she yelled over her shoulder as she slowly felt for the release catch on the torpedo's outer casing. "I've got a live torpedo!" Gritting her teeth, she fumbled awkwardly for a moment before finally withdrawing her hand so she could remove the glove. A rumble vibrated through the deck plates, and she heaved a mostly silent sigh of relief that the pressure doors had been sealed. At least now, they could evacuate the air and kill the fires.

She tried not to think of what effect the depressurization would have on her exposed flesh.

The glove removed, she began feeling for the release catch once more. It slid open under her touch, revealing a badly damaged targeting array. Keying in an override code was not an option. *Oh, Christ*, she groaned before turning to look for tools.

Sight of Ensign Rostova at her back, fighting the fires with Anna's own discarded extinguisher, gave her a moment's pause. Sensing Hess' eyes on her, the ensign glanced briefly in her direction before re-focusing her attention on dealing with the blaze before her.

"I need your tools," Anna snapped, glad that the ensign was wearing the standard DC party suit. Slightly heavier than a normal environmental suit, it had a basic tool set secured to the back in an at-

tachable bag. Rostova backed closer, still spraying the fire with the extinguisher but getting close enough to allow Hess to pull the tool bag free.

Within seconds, Anna had become so focused on the task in front of her that she ceased to notice the constant rolling and shaking of *Endeavour* as the ship conducted evasive maneuvers. Even the hull breach sirens, once so annoying, were no longer the distraction that they had once been. All that mattered was the torpedo in front of her. Sweat trickled down her face, stinging her eyes, but she merely blinked the pain away as she used the hand laser to slice away the casing that protected the warhead's onboard computer. Perspiration began making the tool slippery, and Anna found herself biting her lip so hard that she could taste blood.

When the casing fell to the deck, she studied the exposed circuit board with some trepidation. This wasn't her area of expertise, and she found herself fervently wishing that Rick was here instead of her. As she started to reach for the tool kit, she found Rostova already waiting, the penlight that Hess needed already in hand. Fear was bright in the ensign's eyes.

"You should get clear," Anna suggested as she glanced at the shattered display. There was no way of telling how much time they had left.

"Defuse the damned torpedo, ma'am," Rostova retorted sharply as she aimed the penlight beam at the now exposed circuit board. Despite the situation, Anna smiled.

Her smile quickly faded when she realized that the damage to the warhead's logic functions were beyond her ability to repair. For a moment, she floundered as she tried to figure out what to do. She was a warp field specialist, dammit, not a weapons officer!

"Get the AG dolly," she ordered as she leaned back. Rostova reacted without hesitation and rose to her feet. Seconds later, she had returned with the tool. Based on recently acquired Vulcan technology, the anti-grav device was essential for moving very heavy objects but, due to its voracious power consumption, was used only sparingly. Moving quickly but carefully, Anna secured the torpedo to the dolly before powering the tool up. She rose to her feet slowly, making sure to avoid any rapid and jarring motions.

"Ma'am?" Rostova asked, clearly not understanding the plan, and Anna flashed her grin.

"We're gonna use the torpedo tube to get rid of this sonuvabitch," Hess replied as she began to creep toward the doorway leading to the armory proper. The ensign swallowed before darting toward the opened door, presumably to prep the tube for launch.

A high pitched beeping drew Anna's attention to the AG dolly, and she cursed loudly at the rapidly dwindling power supply. Abandoning her efforts to be steady, she began fast stepping toward the tube. Rostova was already there, prepping the launch computer. She gave Hess a quick glance.

With an angry whine, the anti-grav dolly failed just as Anna was placing the torpedo onto the launch rack. She inhaled sharply at the loud *clank* as the warhead bounced once before settling into the proper position.

"Deploy now!" Hess said loudly as she began to back away. An answering chime sounded as Ensign Rostova pressed the appropriate buttons, and, with a muted growl, the torpedo slid forward slowly.

Sparks suddenly exploded from the launch tube as the small pressure seal meant to close behind the torpedo before launch failed. Even as Anna was trying to backpedal away from the rack, a howl of escaping oxygen let her know that the outer tube door had opened.

And seconds after that, the torpedo exploded.



The explosion rocked the ship.

Worry washing through him, Commander Paul Mayweather leaned forward, focusing his attention on the sensor feed installed before his command chair as *Horizon* shuddered under enemy fire. For the briefest of moments, he felt completely overwhelmed. It was too much. Sixty-four men and women were relying on *his* decisions to get them through this nightmare alive. It was almost enough to cause a sane man panic.

But Paul did not panic. As the anxiety and fear mounted, he concentrated on the problem, focused on what his father and what Travis would do in this situation, and the worry melted away. Sometimes, he could almost sense his brother's presence, as if Travis was standing right there to lend support with a broad smile. Despite his current straits, Paul found himself smiling at the idea of his baby brother standing watch from beyond the grave.

There were worse people to have as a guardian angel, he reckoned.

"Come about to one-three-three mark five-nine," Paul ordered confidently, his fingers dancing across the sensor feed. Without hesitation, the helmsman – a young ensign by the name Farzaneh – obeyed, banking the *Horizon* sharply in a starboard direction. Like every other member of Mayweather's crew, Mehran Farzaneh was an ex-Boomer who had survived Thor's Cradle. While Starfleet Command still struggled with the best way to integrate the massive number of Boomer volunteers, Paul and other ex-ECA captains simply moved forward, accepting only men and women who had spent their entire lives in space. It wasn't bigotry that fueled Mayweather's decision, though. He simply wanted people whom he knew had grown up dealing with the harshness of the black.

"We're red on torpedoes," Lieutenant Commander Mick Berry announced calmly from the tactical board. They had grown up together on Thomas Mayweather's *Horizon*, and no one knew Paul quite as well as Mick did. If Berry had decided not to volunteer for service in Starfleet after the Cradle, Mayweather knew that he wouldn't have been able to either. The idea of spending a single hour aboard this ship without Mick was one that Paul couldn't stomach.

Even as Berry was speaking, *Horizon* was unleashing the last of her ordnance. A pair of torpedoes corkscrewed from the launch tubes, smashing into a Romulan drone that was beginning a combat run on *Endeavour*. Flashes of atomic fire ripped the unmanned vessel apart and sent lethal shrapnel spinning into a second of the drones. As the second vessel shuddered under the unexpected damage, the six phase cannons mounted upon *Horizon* opened up, slicing into the wounded craft with ruthless precision. Hull plating was burned away, exposing the delicate inner workings of the drone. A second barrage of fire expertly cut the craft in two.

Almost instantly, a trio of drones and a single bird of prey oriented themselves upon *Horizon*, banking sharply away from their attack runs. The venerable *Neptune*-class seemed to groan as Ensign Farzaneh sent her into a tight, spiralling dive to evade the incoming fire. It was to be expected, after all. *Horizon's* job was to protect the command ship of the fleet, even if it meant sacrificing themselves to do so. Every officer and crewman on the NC-26 *Horizon* was aware of this fact.

And that was the other reason that Paul recruited whom he did. Every single crewmember of *Horizon* would have been dead at the Cradle had it not been for *Endeavour*, and nearly all of them had outlived their ships in some fashion. They were homeless and entirely without prospects; had it not been for Starfleet offering them a place to serve, many would have been at a loss about what to do. They owed their lives and fortunes to Starfleet, and every one of them was willing to lay down their lives if necessary. Unexpectedly, an old saying popped into Paul's head: *There is nothing more fanatical than a convert.*

He tried not to think about how accurate that statement was.

Incandescent flashes of energy flashed through the void as the four Romulan starships continued to bracket *Horizon* with fire. Torpedoes streaked across the endless night, detonating with fierce ribbons of destructive energy that rattled the twenty-year old ship. Hull breach alarms began shrieking but, at a sharp glance from Paul, the chief petty officer manning the damage control board silenced them.

Lumbering forward with ungainly grace, the UES *Hyperion* surged into weapons range, offensive systems spitting fire. A quartet of photonic torpedoes struck the bird of prey amidships, exploding with such concussive force that the the warship was sent tumbling into one of the drones. Phase cannon fire carved angry gashes across the bird of prey's hull, burning away hull plating and sending streams of molten metal into the darkness.

"Helm, reorient," Paul ordered instantly. "Weps, full barrage on that bird of prey."

It was a dangerous order and Mayweather knew it. With hull breaches already across the ship and no torpedoes remaining, *Horizon* was in no shape to continue the fight. Another commanding officer would have backed down and gone defensive, but that wasn't Paul's style.

Even as *Horizon* began to maneuver toward the bird of prey, the Romulans were regrouping, now focusing on the less maneuverable *Hyperion* to the exclusion of everything else. Like furious hornets, the drones began peppering the slow-moving *Daedalus*-class with their disruptor cannons as the bird of prey went evasive. A trio of torpedoes leapt from the manned Romulan warship, spiralling up and around to home in on *Hyperion*. Paul drew in a sharp breath as the explosive ordnance collapsed the heavier ship's shields and ripped into hull plating.

Engines screaming, one of the unmanned drones – the one previously damaged by the collision with the bird of prey – dove toward the *Hyperion*, slamming into the now exposed bridge section with a fierce explosion. Fires could be seen in the moments before the hard vacuum consumed them, and *Hyperion* shuddered. To their credit, the gunners on the *Daedalus*-class continued to fire their weapons, and another brutal salvo of fire savaged the already damaged bird of prey.

In that moment, *Horizon* pounced.

Of the six phase cannons on the *Neptune*-class, only four were currently functional as *Horizon* barrelled forward. Burning streams of energy slashed across the darkness, searing into the Romulan warship's weakened hull plating. One of the beams cut deeply into the engineering section, puncturing what could only have been a fuel tank of some sort. An explosion of bluish fire ripped the entire compartment open, spilling fragile bodies into the void. Less than a heartbeat later, the entire ship violently self-destructed with a fierce flash of light. Burning debris tumbled through the darkness.

"Incoming from Fleet Command!" Sandra Dyer announced from the communications board. "All ships to rally on *Endeavour*!" The lieutenant studied her board for one moment longer before glancing in Paul's direction.

Mayweather nodded even as he continued to study the sensor data crawling across his feed. To his surprise, *Hyperion* was beginning to maneuver in the direction of *Endeavour*, phase cannons still barking fire at the drones that harassed the heavy ship. Nearly half of the *Daedalus*-class ship's saucer section was gone, destroyed in the explosive collision, yet somehow, some way, the ugly-as-sin starship was still in the fight. Paul shook his head in stunned amazement.

"Incoming!" the sensor operator shouted mere seconds before another wave of drones and birds of prey came into weapons range. Pulses of burning energy flashed through the darkness, slamming into their targets with blistering fury. Explosions ripped the night asunder as torpedoes slammed home with fierce detonations. Hull plating was ripped free and Paul watched in stunned horror as *Gallant* and *Dauntless* died fiery deaths. The *Daedalus*-class *Charlemagne* shuddered under the incredible onslaught, and, for a second, appeared poised to weather the brutal assault. Secondary and tertiary explosions suddenly began to erupt from within the massive ship and, like a poorly constructed model, the *Daedalus*-class fell apart.

Farzaneh sent *Horizon* into a stomach-lurching dive, and Paul winced at the swarm of drones that rushed to pursue. At a glance, he counted over ten. Only *one* had given *Enterprise* trouble, and *Horizon* was easily fifteen years older than Archer's old ship.

I guess this is it, Mayweather reflected, surprised to discover that there wasn't a trace of fear coloring his thoughts. Glancing in Mick's direction, he caught his XO's eye and shrugged at Berry's questioning look. At least they were going to go down fighting.

"Let's make them pay," Paul said with a cold smile. "On my mark, hard to starboard. Weps, fire at will."

As if in agreement with his intention, *Horizon* groaned.



She woke with a groan.

The stench of burned flesh struck her even before she opened her eyes, and Erika Hernandez winced at the foul smell. Pain lanced through her side with each breath, and she fought the overwhelming urge to

slide back into the dark oblivion that beckoned. The steady whine of hull breach alarms slowly penetrated the fog that her brain seemed shrouded in, and she pushed herself off of the deck with a groan.

Almost at once, she wished she hadn't.

Fires were raging everywhere, and the spray of the suppression system inexplicably reminded her of snow. The COM officer, Lieutenant Benitez, was unmoving, her face frozen in a mask of surprised horror at the meter long rod that had impaled her through the chest. The helmsman was face down on the deck, a growing pool of blood around him. Most of his right arm was missing, having been torn free by flying shrapnel. At the damage control board, Ensign Sheldon was trying to staunch the flow of blood from his leg, but Erika had seen enough lethal wounds since the war had started to recognize that it was a futile attempt. Impossibly, Lieutenant Kobasew appeared unhurt as he clung to the tactical board so tightly that his knuckles were white.

The assault had come only moments after they received the comm pulse from *Endeavour* that allowed Lieutenant Commander Jansen to penetrate the nearly system-wide jamming. They had barely enough time to recognize the danger they were in before a shattering salvo of fire had smashed into *Columbia's* already weakened shields and hull plating; both had been overwhelmed almost instantly, and it was a miracle that the ship was still mostly intact.

"Damage report," she demanded sharply, grimacing at the effort it took to speak. Her left leg abruptly buckled, forcing her to quickly grab the overturned command chair to keep from falling. She was only mildly surprised at the lack of feeling in the leg.

"Massive structural damage on all decks," Ensign Sheldon declared in an emotionless voice from the DCO board. He continued his attempts to slow the bleeding from his leg as he spoke.

"All weapon systems are down," Lieutenant Kobasew interrupted. His eyes were wide.

"Port nacelle is leaking warp plasma," Sheldon continued as if the lieutenant hadn't spoken. "And the impulse manifold has been fractured. Core containment has been lost and Commander Lokotz has ordered an evacuation."

Dragging her unresponsive leg, Erika half limped, half hopped the the helm station, collapsing into the blood-soaked chair with a grunt. Her eyes traced over the board before her, noting what was still functional and what wasn't with rapidly sinking hopes.

"Rad levels?" she asked, and Sheldon stared at his board for a long moment. Hernandez frowned. "Ensign?" she prompted, and he winced.

"Shipwide six sieverts and climbing," the shellshocked young man revealed. Erika's expression tightened in horror. *Lethal exposure levels*, she reflected grimly.

Without another word, Erika gave her science officer a glance and felt her stomach clench at the seared features of Lieutenant Commander Jansen. They had served together since before *Columbia* had launched, aboard the *Republic* under Captain Jennings, and Hernandez counted the young woman as a friend. Wincing with each word, the science officer answered the unspoken question.

"Romulan forces are maneuvering to dock," Jansen reported.

An overwhelming sense of failure washed over Erika in that moment as she understood how and why *Columbia* had survived the initial assault. She wanted to howl with fury.

"Captain." Jansen continued, her voice raspy, but strangely urgent. "I've identified their command ship."

"Where?" Hernandez demanded. If they could relay the position to the rest of the fleet...

"Six point nine nine light minutes from our present position." Jansen tried to suppress a hacking cough and was mostly successful. "Course two-nine mark seven-two." The lieutenant commander grimaced. "Boarding parties sighted on C Deck."

For the first time in her Starfleet career, Erika found herself wishing that a self-destruct capability existed upon her ship. Even if the fleet commander was not aboard as the Romulans likely expected, *Columbia* was still too valuable to be captured. She weighed her options and realized that they were remarkably limited.

Based on the helm sensor feed, she could see that Second Fleet was reeling under the Romulan assault; *Athena* was gone, *Ardent* and *Hermes* were crippled, and the other five ships of the fleet were suffering heavy damage. Action needed to be taken, and *Columbia* was the only ship capable of it. Never before had making a decision been so difficult and so easy at the same time.

"Sound collision," she ordered sharply as she began inputting commands into the already damaged helm. "Seal off the bridge and order all hands to evacuate."

Under her hand, *Columbia's* already stressed engines growled in protest as she demanded power. Rad alarms began shrieking as the core containment, already unstable, failed completely. No longer sealed away, even greater levels of radiation began spilling through the ship. Erika glanced at the DCO, noting sadly that Ensign Sheldon had passed out from blood loss. She desperately wished that there was something – anything! – she could do for him.

For that matter, she wished there was something she could do for her entire crew.

Hollow booms echoed through the ship as lifeboats launched. There was no way to determine how many of them would actually be picked up by the other Starfleet ships; it was a grim certainty that many would be destroyed by the Romulans and even more would likely be captured by the mysterious aliens.

"We are warp factor three capable. Time on target?" Erika asked softly, and Commander Jansen answered immediately.

"Fifteen point five seconds, ma'am." The science officer paused as she studied her board. "I'm detecting multiple displacements around the command ship ... I think they're birds of prey."

"Picket ships," Hernandez identified grimly. The helm board chirped once more, indicating that *Columbia* was now oriented on the far distant target. Erika hesitated for only a fraction of a second before engaging the warp engine.

Columbia surged forward, vanishing from the combat zone in a streak of light that caught the Romulan forces not yet docked to her by surprise. Her abrupt acceleration caused her to rip free from the bird of prey that had docked on the starboard side, and emergency bulkheads automatically slammed shut against the vacuum.

Gripping the helm tightly, Hernandez fought against an overwhelming surge of nausea that pounded through her body. The sound of someone vomiting – Lieutenant Kobasew, she thought – caused her own stomach to roll and squirm. Her vision swam, and she closed her eyes against the wild vertigo. A scientist by training, she recognized the symptoms: terminal radiation exposure. She wondered briefly how many sieverts they had been exposed to.

Opening her eyes, she struggled to concentrate on the sensor feed as her vision swam in and out of focus. The Romulans protecting their command ship were beginning to maneuver, clearly realizing the danger that raced toward them at twenty-seven times the speed of light. One of the smaller birds of prey crossed into the threshold, placing itself squarely between *Columbia* and the much larger command ship. It wouldn't be enough, though, not at the velocity *Columbia* had already attained.

Fifteen seconds was an eternity ... but passed in an instant. A single thought flickered across Captain Hernandez's mind, a single regret revolving around the man who had come to mean the world to her. She hoped he escaped this nightmare alive, prayed that there *was* an afterlife so they could be reunited if he didn't.

I'm sorry, Jon, Erika thought in the nanosecond before *Columbia* reached its target.

ACT FOUR

The target was gone.

Eyes unblinking, Jonathan Archer stared at the holo-table with stunned disbelief. There was no way that *Columbia* could have survived, no way that Erika could have survived, and he found himself struggling to accept what he had just seen. He recognized shock setting in and tried to fight it.

He was only partially successful.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lieutenant Reynolds give him a quick assessing glance before quietly assuming command. The part of Jon's brain that wasn't reeling in horror silently thanked the lieutenant for giving Archer this moment, and began to mentally draft the letter of commendation for Reynolds. Jon swallowed the lump in his throat, wondering how he was still able to function at all after what he'd just seen.

When *Columbia's* digital image had vanished from the holo-table, sensor scans had immediately identified her sudden leap to warp speed. It had taken the computer just over ten seconds to calculate her trajectory and likely destination, and a couple more to identify what appeared to be what appeared to be a larger than normal Romulan warbird at that location. Knowing Erika as he did, Jon instantly recognized what she was doing.

By then, of course, it was already too late.

The collision between *Columbia* and one of the birds of prey defending the command ship had occurred in the exact moment that Archer realized Erika's plan. Both ships were instantly destroyed, and the energy released at the point of impact was nothing short of cataclysmic. The resulting shockwave smashed into the other picket ships with hull-crushing force; at least one of the birds of prey was sent tumbling into the command ship, and, even now, *Endeavour's* sensors could detect significant structural damage on the warbird itself.

Anger pulsed through Jon's veins, a furious wrath that caused his hands to tremble and his vision to blur. The hatred that he had reserved for the Xindi after their attack seemed a paltry thing compared to the emotion that now thundered through his mind, and he grit his teeth tightly together to prevent from venting his fury in a scream. Now was not the time. Too many lives were depending upon him to lose control.

As he buried his emotions under a rigid layer of control, Jon felt a familiar sensation at the back of his mind that felt amazingly like approval. It had a distinct Vulcan flavor to it, one that Archer had experienced off and on in the years since Surak's *katra* had been removed from his mind. Most of the time, it was barely noticeable, an uncanny ability to suppress his emotions when absolutely necessary as well as an insight into Vulcan culture that occasionally caused his fellow officers to look at him with curiosity. But sometimes, like now, it was all he could do to avoid speaking in ancient Vulcan.

On the holo-table, Archer could see the Romulans already in the process of regrouping. Many had pulled back from the area of engagement following *Columbia's* disappearance, and at least half of the combat force present was now maneuvering toward their crippled command ship. Archer spent a mo-

ment studying the tactical display, any hope of salvaging a victory out of this situation rapidly dwindling as he took in the sheer scope of the forces arrayed against them. He glared at the screen.

"Send to all ships," he said abruptly. The sharpness of his voice caused the combat controllers to jerk in surprise and all of them looked up from the table. Archer struggled to keep his expression as confident as possible. "Broken Arrow," he declared grimly. Unsurprisingly, Reynolds reacted first.

"Understood. Broken Arrow is given," the lieutenant responded before giving his fellow officers a sharp look. "Send to all ships," Reynolds ordered, glaring angrily when the junior officers hesitated. "Now!" he snapped, causing Ensigns Dill and Lunceford to jump.

It was an old code, one that had originally been used by Americans in reference to an accidental event involving nuclear weapons or components. Later, it had become an emergency code used by military ground forces needing emergency close air support while in danger of being overrun by enemy troops. During the latter part of the Eugenics Wars, it had undergone yet another change, becoming the retreat command for all forces when facing an overwhelming defeat.

As the team issued the emergency retreat command, Jon could see an immediate response on the holo-table. Already suffering heavy losses, the surviving three ships of Fifth Fleet – two *Neptunes* and a trio of *Daedalus* – quickly began accelerating away from the combat zone in an attempt to get clear of the planetary gravity well. Two of the *Daedalus*-class ships lurked in the rear of the formation, absorbing heavy damage as they provided covering fire for its escaping cohorts.

"Incoming transmission from *Indefatigable*," Reynolds announced, and Jon gave him a nod.

"Broken Arrow acknowledged." Commodore Burnside Clapp's voice was heavily distorted as it emerged from the comm system, but still recognizable. "There are a lot of deployed lifeboats..." The Australian trailed off, and Archer's expression darkened as he studied the holo-table for another long second.

"Recover what you can," Jon ordered grimly, "but *only* if they are in your exit vector." It was a hard decision, one that Archer hated to make and Jon felt the last vestige of the wide-eyed explorer he had once been wither and die.

"Jon..."

"That *is* an order, Commodore." Archer spoke with as much authority as he could manage. "No unnecessary risks." The words were tumbling from his lips before Jon even realized what he was saying. Once again, he could almost sense Surak's approval at his usage of absolute logic.

"Understood," Burnside Clapp replied. From his voice, he didn't approve but Jon simply knew that he understood. It was one of the military maxims that was drilled into Starfleet officers upon graduation: the burden of command sometimes required hard choices. Frowning, Archer tried not to think about how he had briefly lost focus of that in the Expanse, even as he struggled to ignore the tickle in his brain that was Surak. T'Pol had warned him that there might be a residual trace of the long dead Vulcan, but right now, it felt like a lot more than a trace.

"What about the survivors?" Lieutenant Esque asked, her expression bordering on horror. Archer gave her a look, once more reminding himself that this was her first actual combat mission. She had never before been faced with the hard truths of war. "They'll die or be captured!"

"*Spunau bolayalar t'Wehku bolayalar t'Zamu il t'Veh,*" Jon said in response, drawing a curious look from Reynolds as he spoke.

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few," Reynolds translated softly for his junior officers, and Archer could see the sick comprehension settling in on them.

"Or the one." Jon rose from his seat as he spoke. "I'll be on the bridge," he stated. There wasn't anything else he could do here, and staying would only remind him that Erika was gone. He was through the door before Lieutenant Reynolds was even able to acknowledge him.

The turbolift did not immediately open at his summons, and Jon glared at it for a long moment. His tension mounted in the long moments that passed, and he glowered darkly at the flickering lights denoting their current alert status. As he was reaching to press the summons button again, the doors slid open, revealing Trip and most of his command staff. Both the communications officer and navigator were injured, with the former bleeding from a scalp wound and the latter thoroughly unconscious.

"Get them to Sickbay," Trip ordered the master chief holding the helmsman before looking at Jon. "What's wrong?" he demanded quickly as he quickly walked from the lift. Archer fell into step alongside him as the gruff tactical officer flanked them.

"I've issued a Broken Arrow command," Jon replied grimly. Tucker nodded, a sour expression on his own face; there was no hint of surprise in his features.

"T'Pol is in Auxiliary Command," he revealed. "I could use an experienced pilot," Trip continued, jerking his head in the direction of the turbolift. Archer nodded as they approached the door leading to the battle bridge.

It opened with a hiss.



The door would not open.

Desperation fueling his muscles, Subcommander D'deridex strained against the vacuum seal that prevented him entry into battle-control deck. Around him, fires raged unabated and the howl of hull breach alarms echoed loudly through the ship. Sparks rained down upon him from exploding junctions, burning his exposed skin and causing him to grit his teeth against the sharp pain.

"I need assistance!" he shouted loudly, even as he doubled his efforts to pry the door open. Another explosion vibrated through the deckplates of the *Ra'kholh*, forcing D'deridex to brace himself against fall-

ing. With a loud crack, the electro-plasma system conduits along the corridor suddenly ruptured, spraying a pair of approaching Rihannsu crewmen with the superheated gas.

Neither had a chance to even shriek.

His breath catching, D'deridex stared at the two bodies in stunned horror as they were rapidly consumed. At temperatures in excess of three million degrees, the ionized electro-plasma was more lethal to living tissue than any acid that the subcommander could name. The acrid stench of seared flesh washed over him, and he bit back the urge to gag.

Fumbling with the latch on the wall-mounted suppression system, D'deridex began coughing as the atmosphere scrubbers started to fail. A familiar alert sounded as his fingers danced across the keypad and he forced himself to keep working to engage the automated failsafes. Behind him, the heat of the electro-plasma leak washed over his body. Sweat began dripping into his face, and he winced at the rapidly escalating temperatures.

"Unable to comply," the computer suddenly announced in response to his inputted commands, and D'deridex smashed his hand against the terminal interface, hoping to jostle its circuits sufficiently to obtain an alternate response. The hiss of the plasma leak suddenly became louder, and he glanced back in time to witness the explosion.

With a flash of blood green fire, the electro-plasma ignited, ripping apart metal as it did so. Screaming loudly, D'deridex dove away from the searing heat, slamming into a closed corridor access point with as much force as he could manage. The sound of tearing metal filled his ears as he tumbled onto the deck and scrambled for cover. Microseconds later, the roar of the ignited plasma preceded the angry firestorm as it thundered through the corridor.

Hands over his ears, D'deridex crouched behind the cover, forcing his body into the smallest area possible. Waves of heat lapped over him, scorching his flesh and sending spasms of agony shooting through his body. He was screaming, he realized with some surprise, as the fire raged around him, consuming the oxygen of the ship like some wild beast intent on destruction. A part of him knew that screaming was dangerous, but the fear ... the *terror* was too overwhelming to ignore.

The distant whine of a hull breach alarm penetrated the fog of panic, and D'deridex suddenly realized that the fire was gone. He opened his eyes, wincing at the sharp pain that lanced through his body with each movement. At a glance, he could see that his exposed flesh had been badly burned. Large blisters were apparent, and his skin was much darker than normal.

Climbing to his feet, D'deridex pushed the pain away. He didn't have time to focus on his own pain, not when the admiral could need his assistance. Glancing around, he swallowed in amazement that he survived the firestorm at all. There was no way to identify the contents of the cabin he had sought refuge in. The blaze had consumed it all. He should not have survived.

Ra'kholh shuddered once more, and D'deridex recognized the distinct feel of a change in the atmosphere of the ship. Pressure doors had been lowered, hopefully an indication that other survivors existed and were even now conducting rescue operations. Limping toward the broken door, the subcommander stepped into the blackened corridor and retraced his steps to the sealed doorway leading to the battle-control deck.

Per standard procedure, Admiral Valdore had sealed the deck once *Ra'kholh* entered the fight. It was a preventative measure designed for the admiral's safety, both from ship damage and from any potential assassins hoping to use the chaos of the engagement as an opportunity. Once the vacuum locks were engaged, the battle-control deck's life support system would come online.

Anger and frustration pulsed through D'deridex as he reached the door. The access panel, which had already refused to accept his override code, was now a pile of smoldering junk. Plastic parts and circuits had been melted by the searing heat of the plasma fire, and even the duranium outer casing was misshapen and distorted. With a growl, the subcommander slammed his fist into the useless mess before turning away. He paused, mentally studying the *Ra'kholh's* deckplan for a moment. His eyes snapped open, and he lurched forward into a halting sprint. Sweat broke out on his brow as he struggled to ignore the blinding pain that screamed through his body.

A trio of heavily armed and badly burned centurions were clustered around the airlock that was D'deridex's destination, and they gave him shellshocked looks as he struggled to pull the tool kit from the inner wall. One of them finally seemed to remember his role and awkwardly assumed a position of attention, despite the pain he was in.

"Sir?" the centurion asked. It was sufficient to remind the other two of their inferior places in the command hierarchy, and they too straightened.

"The *Daise'Khre'Riov* is still in the *oira*," D'deridex declared, his voice raspy. "I require your aid to gain entrance."

"*Ssuaj-ha!*" the trio acknowledged in unison. The largest of the three shouldered D'deridex out of the way and ripped the tool kit free from the metal restraints that held it into place. The trio exchanged a curious look, one that D'deridex could not quite decipher, before marching from the airlock.

As the three centurions worked on unsealing the vacuum door with fusion torches, Subcommander D'deridex found himself emerging from the shock that had clouded his mind. Concern began bubbling within his stomach as he noted the discreet glances that the three soldiers kept exchanging. It was an uncomfortable realization that he was unarmed should they pose a threat.

With a booming clang, the door fell to the deck, prompting the three centurions to jump away from the dangerous weight. D'deridex ignored them as he entered the *oira*, momentarily setting aside his concerns as he took in the shattered battle-control deck with a startled gasp. Debris littered the *oira*, and smoke was thick in the air as dozens of small fires raged, voraciously consuming flammable components. The holo-tank was a shattered ruin and flickered haphazardly. Admiral Valdore was sprawled out on the deck, his uniform stained with blood. To D'deridex's relief, the admiral was still breathing.

One of the centurions stepped forward, his face devoid of expression as he drew his disruptor pistol in a smooth motion.

"*Ael'Riov*, Chulak sends his regards," the centurion growled as he aimed the weapon at the unmoving admiral. He squeezed the trigger before D'deridex could react.

But the weapon did not fire.

Even as the centurion was snarling a curse at the fire-damaged pistol, D'deridex was lunging toward him. The subcommander's hand, balled tightly in a fist, slammed into the centurion's throat with crushing force, and D'deridex could feel the man's trachea collapse under his attack. With a strangled gasp, the centurion staggered backwards, dropping his weapon as his hand instinctively went to his throat. Moving faster than he had any right to, D'deridex caught the falling disruptor with his other hand. He spun on one foot, tracking the other two centurions with the weapon. One of them was going for his pistol as well, and the subcommander squeezed the trigger.

A sickly green pulse of energy flashed from the damaged pistol, burning into the second centurion's face with much less power than it should. It was enough to cause the soldier to cry out in pained surprise, and D'deridex darted toward him, discarding the useless weapon as he did so. He slammed into centurion, the force of their collision lifting the other man off of his feet. They fell backwards, D'deridex atop him, and the centurion suddenly screamed as the jagged slabs of transparisteel of the shattered holo-tank punched through his flesh and sliced into his internal organs. D'deridex rolled to his feet, his hands quickly ripping the man's *dathe'anofv-sne* free of its scabbard.

The third centurion had not moved and stood staring at D'deridex with wide eyes.

"I did not know, *Erei'Riov!*" the centurion stammered. He dropped to his knees, offering his neck in supplication. Another strangled gasp drew D'deridex's attention to the first centurion and he offered a smile devoid of any emotion at sight of the man slowly asphyxiating.

"Draw your weapon," D'deridex ordered the third centurion as he gestured to the choking man with the captured smallblade. "And execute this traitor."

"I obey, *Erei'Riov.*" The centurion stood and brushed past D'deridex as he drew his disruptor pistol. Placing the barrel at the choking centurion's head, he squeezed the trigger without hesitation. Valdore's words came back to D'deridex as he observed.

"To command effectively, *Erei'Riov*, you must be without mercy." Nodding, the subcommander understood the admiral's teachings and acted.

Without hesitation, he plunged the Honor Blade into the third centurion's exposed back.

The blade sliced through the man's spine with the ease of a laser through butter, and the centurion collapsed in an unmoving heap. Face set in a frown, D'deridex gave the three traitors a momentarily look, assuring himself that they were dead. Kneeling down, he lifted the unconscious Admiral Valdore from the floor and carried him from the battle-control deck.

Behind him, the fires continued unabated.



There were fires on all decks, reports of hull breaches throughout the ship, and most of the weapon systems were offline, yet Lieutenant Daniel Hsiao was having the time of his life.

Standing in the center of *Hyperion's* battle bridge, he fought to keep his expression as stern and unyielding as possible. As the ranking officer aboard the nearly crippled *Daedalus*-class, command had fallen to Dan when the bridge was destroyed. In what had clearly been meant as a calculated insult, Commander Rivers had ordered Hsiao to the auxiliary command station where Dan was to stand by until contacted. Up until the Romulan drone had smashed into A Deck, obliterating the bridge on impact and killing the entire command staff of *Hyperion*, Hsiao had done nothing since their arrival in Zeta Reticuli beyond pacing.

He tried not to think what it said about his personality that he was finding the current situation absolutely exhilarating.

"Incoming from Fleet Command," Lieutenant Junior Grade Nicole Watt announced from her station at the COM board. The next highest ranking officer still alive, she was now Dan's acting first officer even though this was her first combat operation. Green and relatively inexperienced, she was competent and smart, which was, Hsiao reckoned, a perfect combination for an executive officer. He gave her a look at the sharp intake of breath he heard her take. "Broken Arrow," she declared.

Instantly, Dan clenched his hands tightly as he recognized the retreat command. The feeling of failure churned in his gut as he nodded.

"Send: acknowledge," Hsiao ordered, before turning his attention back to the main viewer. A deckplan of the *Hyperion* was displayed, with entire sections highlighted in bright red to indicate known hull breaches. Reports from the DC teams were filtering in, updating the damage report on a minute by minute basis. "Engineering," Dan said, his words directed to the chief petty officer manning the DCO board. "Status on warp core."

"Functional," the CPO replied instantly, her eyes locked on the board before her. "ChEng reports warp field steady." Dan opened his mouth to ask who Chang was, before recognizing the abbreviation for chief engineer's title. He frowned at his ignorance, once more finding himself frustrated at the almost foreign language the crew of *Hyperion* used. It had taken him the entire twenty days of travel time to gain sufficient understanding of the shipwide jargon to issue commands that weren't misunderstood. Even now, some of their expressions simply eluded comprehension. How hell was he supposed to know where the "goat locker" was or, for that matter, *what* the hell it was?

"Weps," he snapped, bracing himself as *Hyperion* shook under another enemy barrage. More sections on the primary hull were highlighted red on the main viewscreen. Despite his dislike for the appearance of the *Daedalus*-class, Hsiao had to admit she was tough.

"Two torpedo tubes working," the petty officer said in response. He was the palest man that Dan had ever seen. "Only one phase cannon operational, sir," the PO3 continued, frowning at the data on his board. "WSO is on it."

"Damage control teams reporting plasma fire on E deck," Lieutenant Watt said abruptly. She looked up in suppressed horror. "It's close to torpedo room four!"

"Seal off the section," Dan ordered instantly. He could vividly recall Captain Tucker's voice at Thor's Cradle and found himself emulating the older man's posture. Tucker's coolness under fire had made a serious impact on how Dan looked at situations like this; action had to be taken and it was the job of the commanding officer, no matter how difficult, to step forward and take that action.

"There are crewmen in there!" Watt pointed out, and Hsiao gave her a tight-lipped frown.

"Evacuate the oxygen in the entire section," he continued, ignoring her horrified gasp. Pinning the DCO with a fierce gaze, he spoke again. "That *is* an order, Chief."

It was a hard call, knowing that at least five crewmen could perish of asphyxiation if they weren't wearing the appropriate gear, but Dan was astounded at how easily he was able to make the decision. The ship's survival took precedence over the lives of those crewmen, and nothing was more dangerous than a fire in or even near a torpedo room, especially with the unstable Mark VI photonic torpedoes that Starfleet insisted on deploying. A single one of the warheads prematurely detonating could ignite the entire electro-plasma system that powered the ship and such an event would be catastrophic. With effort, he pushed down dark memories of his first duty station.

"Failure in pressure door echo three tee eight!" the DCO declared suddenly, tension thick in her voice. She banged on the damage control console as if that would inexplicably force the malfunctioning vacuum door to work. A moment passed as Dan weighed options. He could only think of one.

"Stand by to open airlock echo seven," he decided. "Weps, I want you to open the torpedo tube to vacuum at the same time. We're only going to get one chance at this." The two non-comms nodded, quickly recognizing his intent. "Lieutenant Watt, inform the DC team." Dan paused for a moment. "Execute."

He could easily imagine the wail of oxygen as it was sucked out of the ship, as well as the horrific image of a plasma fire being channelled toward the open airlock like a horizontal tornado. Hsiao's first tour of duty was aboard the *Neptune*-class *Ganymede*, and he still had the occasional nightmare of the plasma fire that had nearly killed him. Unable to shut off the leak, the ship's first officer had ordered the chief engineer to vent the entire section to space. Twelve crewmembers and the commanding officer had been lost fighting the lethal conflagration, but the ship had been saved. That near death experience had ultimately prompted Dan to request a transfer to flight operations. After all, pilots weren't killed as often as engineers.

He tried not to think about Lieutenant Commander Selma Rodriguez, *Hyperion's* XO and chief helmsman, gone in a blink of an eye. Thoughts of her would invariably lead to memories of the previous night and how she tasted when she kissed him, or how she sounded when nearing climax. *War will make corpses of us all*, Dan quoted bitterly, trying hard not to begin grieving for a new lover lost too soon.

"Section has been vented," the enlisted DCO stated, and Dan glanced at her nametag, suddenly feeling guilty that he didn't even know her name. They could be dead in the next couple of seconds and she was *just* the enlisted damage control officer to him.

"Is the fire out?" Hsiao asked, and CPO Koeppel nodded. "Tactical display," he ordered as the ship shuddered once more.

The image on the main viewscreen blinked and switched to a 2D overview of the combat zone. A frown crossed Dan's face at the sheer number of hostile blips, each representing a Romulan ship. *Well*, he reflected with morbid amusement, *that explains the Broken Arrow*. One of Sixth Fleet's surviving *Neptunes* – the UES *Horizon*, by its IFF code – was reeling under a concentrated assault by Romulan drones, and Hsiao frowned darkly.

"Set two seven one mark zero," he said as he sat in the uncomfortable command chair. "Weapons free and hot." He forced an unconcerned expression on his face, as if they were just going out for a quick test flight instead of a suicidal frontal assault. He glanced at the petty officer manning the tactical board and mentally memorized the man's name as well.

"Two phase cannons functioning at seventy percent, sir," PO3 Vlachko relayed, clearly anticipating Dan's question. "One phase cannon at twenty percent."

"Good enough," Hsiao remarked as he leaned forward. "Let's open up a hole for *Endeavour* to get clear."

Engines growling, *Hyperion* accelerated toward the center of the Romulan formation, cannons barking nonstop. She shook under incoming fire, the blistering energy of enemy disruptor beams slicing into the already overstressed hull plating. Metal evaporated under the searing heat, and klaxons shrieked their warnings. *Hold together*, Dan urged the rumbling ship as they neared the exit vector point. *Just a little longer...*

She held together.



She was holding up nicely, despite the stress.

As he stepped through the doorway and into auxiliary command, Trip Tucker felt a sudden flash of guilt at that thought. He instantly shot an apologetic look toward T'Pol, noting without surprise that she was firmly parked at the science station. Sensing the direction of his musings, she glanced briefly in his direction, raising an eyebrow as she did. There was no hint of reproach in her thoughts despite his own self-recrimination for doubting her abilities, and, for that, Trip was grateful. In the years since she had revealed her self-inflicted mental damage, he had gone out of his way to avoid placing her in a situation like this, knowing how little she wanted to command.

From the command chair, Lieutenant Ricker looked back at his arrival and rose to her feet instantly. His face set in a bleak frown, Commodore Archer pushed past Trip and quickly moved toward the pilot's station, relieving the enlisted helmsman without a word. To Tucker's surprise, Eisler shook his head slightly when Lieutenant Kornegay started to move from the tactical station; almost instantly, Trip realized the wisdom of that action since the lieutenant had a better grasp of the current tactical situation than the lieutenant commander. The ex-MACO took up a position behind Kornegay to study the readouts on her board.

"Damage report," Trip demanded as he took his place in the command chair.

"Minor hull breaches throughout the ship," Petty Officer 2nd Class Daley replied from the DC board. "All stations report functional."

"Shields at five percent," Kornegay revealed on the top of that. "Hull plating holding at eighty percent. Aft torpedo tube Beta nonfunctional. Phase cannons Gamma, Delta and Epsilon inoperative."

"Controls are sluggish," Archer muttered as he sent *Endeavour* into a tight, spiraling dive to avoid incoming fire. The inertial dampeners struggled to compensate against the abrupt change in direction, and, for a moment, gravity pushed Tucker back into his seat.

"What's the fleet status?" he asked.

"All ships are proceeding toward the exit vector," T'Pol responded instantly, her fingers still dancing across her board. "UES *Telemachus* has transitioned to warp. I am detecting massive structural damage on all remaining ships."

"On screen," Tucker ordered. He winced instantly at the image on the main viewscreen as the UES *Hyperion* shuddered under Romulan fire. Great chunks of hull plating were missing, exposing the internal superstructure of the *Daedalus*-class. The entire upper section of the primary hull was missing, the result of what appeared to have been a collision of some sort. Trip pushed down his concern over Dan Hsiao; worrying about whether the lieutenant had survived could wait until the ships were out of danger.

As Tucker opened his mouth to issue commands, he was astounded to see an equally battered UES *Horizon* lurch into the image, phase cannons spraying sizzling streams of energy at the Romulan ships that were harassing *Hyperion*. A trio of Romulan drones were hot on the *Neptune*-class ship's tail, disruptor cannons firing almost nonstop. One of *Horizon's* nacelles was already shattered, spraying warp plasma as she maneuvered through the void. The other nacelle was flickering wildly, a clear indication that it was about to fail completely and strand the *Neptune*-class ship in the system.

Not on my watch, Trip growled mentally. He glanced at the sensor feed installed in front of the command chair and frowned in surprise at the apparent lack of cohesion among the Romulan forces. It was as if they were suddenly competing against one another instead of working together. Two birds of prey on *Endeavour's* aft were proving to be more trouble to one another than they were for the Starfleet ship. Something had clearly happened in the long minutes it had taken for Trip to get from the bridge to auxiliary command.

With a flash, *Hyperion* leaped to warp speed, followed immediately by UES *Champion*, a *Neptune*-class ship that was blackened and charred by enemy fire. In the seconds after *Hyperion* vanished, the Romulan drones that had been harassing the *Daedalus*-class abruptly turned their fire upon *Horizon*. An explosion of fire erupted from the already ravaged *Neptune*-class ship as disruptor fire sliced into the engineering section, sending burning debris tumbling wildly away.

"Dammit," Trip muttered. He turned his attention to tactical, noticing that Eisler had finally stepped forward and discreetly replaced Lieutenant Kornegay. "Get those ships off of *Horizon!*" Tucker snapped.

On the screen, *Horizon* shuddered once more under the enemy fire. A shower of flame and debris sprayed out as the port nacelle was blasted free and sent spinning into the endless darkness. Trip's breath caught as the crippled ship banked sharply, phase cannons still spitting energy at the attacking Romulan drones as if in defiance of her dire situation. One of the drones exploded under the assault, but there was no doubt that it was only a matter of time before *Horizon* was permanently crippled.

Under Eisler's direction, *Endeavour's* cannons shifted fire from protection to offense. Three of the drones broke apart instantly, followed by a fourth and fifth. Photonic torpedoes exploded against the

shields of the single bird of prey maneuvering to attack *Horizon*, briefly illuminating the nearly invisible force screen that surrounded it and forcing it into a twisting evasive maneuver. A second salvo of phase cannon fire lashed out, burning into two more of the drones with lethal and explosive results.

"*Horizon's* warp core has lost containment," T'Pol suddenly announced from her station, and Trip ground his teeth in frustration as the heavily damaged *Neptune*-class continued to limp toward the exit vector at full impulse. There was no way for the ship to escape now. Tucker's gaze momentarily alighted on the back of Archer's head and a wild idea occurred to him. Even as his eyes widened, Trip could feel his mate's incredulous glance that he would even consider such a plan.

"Hail them and tell them to stand by to eject their core," Trip said quickly before shooting Eisler a look. "Bring the grapplers and tractor emitters online."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer replied without question.

"Helm-"

"On it," Commodore Archer interrupted, clearly recognizing what Trip had in mind. The commodore's fingers flew across the helm and sent *Endeavour* into a gentle climb as he matched *Horizon's* velocity.

"Forty seconds to core breach," T'Pol relayed off her board. Through the bond that connected them, Trip could feel her mental shake of the head as she calculated the odds of this succeeding. They were distressingly low, given *Horizon's* heavy damage.

"*Horizon* standing by," Lieutenant Ricker said from the comm station that she had taken over.

"Romulans pulling back," Eisler announced at the same time, and Trip nodded in recognition of that fact. A core breach was always destructive, and remaining within the blast radius was not logical.

"Thirty seconds," T'Pol said.

"Grapple range in ... five seconds," Archer declared. On the main viewscreen, *Horizon* loomed, and Tucker found himself tensing with expectation.

"Firing," the tactical officer said sharply a heartbeat later. *Horizon* shuddered as *Endeavour's* grapples slammed onto her primary hull; less than a second later, the tractor emitters activated, securing their grip on the crippled smaller ship. There was an instant change in *Endeavour's* ambient sounds as the added mass slowed her significantly.

"Twenty seconds." T'Pol's announcement was grim.

"Hard contact acquired," Eisler said.

"Set one eight zero mark zero," Trip ordered calmly, ignoring the surprised look that T'Pol gave him. "Maximum impulse. *Horizon*, stand by."

With a loud whine, *Endeavour* banked sharply, dragging the *Neptune*-class with it. A cluster of Romulan drones almost instantly began to accelerate toward them, and Tucker smiled grimly.

"Ten seconds," T'Pol stated.

"Stand by for warp speed," Trip said, noting Archer's immediate adjustment of their heading to avoid a collision at warp velocities. Orders to that effect had not even been necessary. "Horizon, eject on my mark."

Disruptor beams began flashing toward them, splattering against the already depleted shields. Alarms began shrieking in response.

"Five seconds." T'Pol's words betrayed none of the tension that she was experiencing.

"Mark!" Tucker said loudly. A shudder ran through *Endeavour* as *Horizon* cut loose its failing reactor. It tumbled end over end through the void, a fragile-looking instrument of destruction. "Warp speed now!" Trip demanded as the energy levels on the warp core spiked abruptly. *Endeavour's* engine growled as she surged forward, accelerating to superluminal speeds almost instantly and carrying her from the combat zone.

A second later, *Horizon's* core exploded with a violent flash of light.

ACT FIVE

With a flash of light, *Endeavour* slowed from warp.

From her station, Commander T'Pol exhaled a discreet sigh of relief and spent a long moment studying her sensor readings. She could feel Trip's eyes on her and could sense his urgency, but she refused to be rushed. Haste could lead to errors, and they could not afford any mistakes.

"Scans indicate no pursuit," she declared once she was satisfied with her work. Her statement prompted an immediate look of befuddled worry from Trip, and T'Pol raised an eyebrow at his moment of disbelief. That slight motion was enough to prevent his asking her to confirm her scans, an unnecessary request which contained an unstated critique of her ability. He knew better than to do that.

"Are you sure?" Commodore Archer asked from the helm station, and T'Pol directed her sharp look to him instead.

"Positive," she replied flatly.

"Contact *Horizon*," Trip ordered Lieutenant Ricker as he stood. "Tell them to stand by for transport." As he spoke, T'Pol began mentally reviewing the billeting situation in an attempt to determine where the uninjured or walking wounded could reside during the twenty day journey to Sol. It would be a tight squeeze and would likely require personnel to share bunk space on a rotating schedule, an undesirable practice that the humans referred to as hot bunking, but it was manageable. Much depended upon the number and nature of *Horizon's* casualties.

"I'll be at the transporter," Trip continued. The fury that had nearly overwhelmed him earlier was inexplicably gone, but T'Pol could now feel his absolute need to *do* something. Manning the transporter was as good a task as any and, given their current location on D Deck, it was only meters away. That it would not require any members of the already overstressed engineering team to abandon their damage control duties was an added bonus. Tucker was about to speak again when Commodore Archer interrupted.

"I'll join you," the commodore stated as he stood, the tone of his voice brooking no disagreement. T'Pol frowned slightly and exchanged a quick glance with her mate; never before had she seen Jonathan Archer in this mood and, from her sense of Trip, neither had he. It was most troubling.

"Aye, sir," Trip said hesitantly as he gestured toward the door. "You have the bridge, T'Pol," he declared before stepping through the hatch.

"All stations report," T'Pol ordered before the door had closed behind the captain. She pinned Lieutenant Ricker with a look. "You are relieved, Lieutenant," she said. It was mildly amusing to see the offended and slightly angry expression that flashed across Ricker's face for a heartbeat. "Consult Sickbay for a sedative. In eight hours, I expect you to report back here to assume normal watch rotation." Understanding caused the lieutenant's face to darken in embarrassment as she nodded.

"Aye, ma'am," the young woman replied as she headed for the door. Remembering her extensive study of human psychology, T'Pol spoke up again.

"Lieutenant." Ricker paused at the doorway and looked back. "Excellent work. I will be recommending that you receive a commendation for your performance today." The lieutenant smiled broadly.

"Thank you, ma'am!" At T'Pol's nod of dismissal, Ricker stepped through the open doorway.

"Tucker to bridge." Trip's voice echoed out of the wall speakers. "We're beginning transport now. Have Phlox stand by to receive casualties."

"Acknowledged." T'Pol gave the petty officer now manning the communications board a nod that carried with it an unspoken command before addressing the captain once more. "Recommend you transport personnel from Engineering first." She frowned slightly at the hint of the mirthless chuckle that returned across the comm line.

"Already ahead of ya," the captain replied. "Let me know immediately if you pick up any Romulans on the sensors." The urge to point out that this order was entirely unnecessary was difficult to suppress, but T'Pol found it within the reservoir of her self-control to accomplish the task. Barely.

"Acknowledged," she said in response, annoyance making her reply slightly sharper than normal. Somehow, she doubted that anyone but Trip would recognize the change in her voice.

Department status reports began appearing on her station monitor, and she spent long moments studying them. Comparatively, damage to *Endeavour* was relatively light, due in no small part to the highly efficient hull polarization system devised by the engineering team and deployed prior to launch. She suspected that Master Chief Mackenzie would be pleased to learn that fact. There were still some serious concerns, however; a hull breach in the vicinity of a deuterium tank understandably remained the current focus of the damage control teams. Weapon repair teams under the command of Lieutenant Hayes were already working on restoring power to several of the offline phase cannons.

"Tucker to bridge." Without taking her eyes from the display, T'Pol reached for the integrated comm panel on her station and depressed the transmit button.

"This is T'Pol."

"We've got the last of *Horizon's* crew aboard. Get us out of here."

"Aye, captain." She gave the petty officer at the helm a steady look. "Take us to warp four," she ordered. "Resume heading zero zero one." It was the height of arrogance to identify the Sol system as Sector 001, but T'Pol had learned to indulge the Terrans in their human-centric value system. By evolutionary terms, they were still quite young and had much to learn.

She tried not to think about how Vulcan starcharts listed their homeworld as Sector *Veh*.

Endeavour's engines growled as the Starfleet ship once more made the jump to faster-than-light velocities. It was entirely understandable if they sounded a bit more strained than normal, given the added mass of the mostly derelict *Horizon* being towed; T'Pol made some rapid calculations to determine how long they could travel with the *Neptune*-class at their back before setting those concerns aside. If necessary, they could scuttle the *Horizon* and continue on without its additional drag. Satisfied, she gave the sensor array a quick glance.

"Sensors indicate no pursuit, Captain," she said into the comm. His reply was immediate.

"All right. I'll be in sickbay. Tucker out." The commline chirped once before going dead.

An ominous silence descended upon the auxiliary bridge, broken only by the occasional beep of a computer system. At a glance, T'Pol could see that the personnel present were beginning to experience the after-effects of combat stress. No longer did fear or excitement-induced adrenaline course through their bodies, and each was forced to deal with the stress in his or her own manner.

For a Vulcan, the hormone secreted during situations like the one they had just escaped was many times more powerful than the human equivalent, and T'Pol found her hand trembling slightly. No one saw this, of course, and she bent her considerable willpower to suppressing the physical effects. Had her duties not demanded that she remain present on the bridge, she would have retreated to her cabin for some much needed meditation. Sexual activity accomplished similar results following such stressful events, and she had always found that Trip was quite amorous after a near death experience. It was ... unfortunate that he too was forced by duty to be elsewhere, but T'Pol made a decision to visit his cabin later that night.

A flood of anger and sadness washed over her in that moment, and she instantly recognized the taste of it as Trip's. Tentatively, she reached out through the bond, recoiling almost instantly at his grief. Her mate was with the commodore, and the realization that Captain Hernandez had perished sent another stab of anguish through her. This time, it was her reaction, not Trip's, and she closed her eyes against the rampaging emotions that pulsed between them. She could not imagine how the commodore was able to press forward, knowing that his mate was lost. To a Vulcan, it was nearly inconceivable. Trip's struggle with the silicate virus many years earlier had nearly destroyed her fragile control, and she could not envision how she would have been able to move forward had he died.

"Ma'am?" Lieutenant Commander Eisler's voice was soft, and T'Pol opened her eyes to discover the tactical officer standing a half meter away from her, a look of slight concern on his face.

"I am fine," she replied to his unspoken question. He didn't look entirely convinced, but did not press the matter. It was one of the things she appreciated the most about Commander Eisler. Unlike so many other humans that she had dealt with since *Enterprise* had launched, he understood personal and professional boundaries. In many ways, he was more Vulcan than human, especially in his personal interactions.

That should not have saddened her, but, for some reason, it did.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'm going to head to the Armory." She quirked an eyebrow, recognizing in him the same need to accomplish a task that she had felt in Trip earlier. At her nod, he marched toward the hatch.

The rest of the duty shift passed relatively uneventfully. T'Pol allowed herself to become distracted by the workload before her, and spent nearly the entire shift directing repair teams to the locations where they were most needed. When Lieutenant Ricker gently touched her shoulder, T'Pol experienced a momentary flash of surprise at just *how* distracted she had become. Fatigue pressed down upon her, and she gratefully turned over command to her relief before departing the auxiliary bridge. She needed food, meditation and sleep. And Trip, of course, but that could wait until the time was more appropriate. From her sense of him, she could tell that he was deep in ship repairs; maintaining the extended

warp field around *Horizon* was proving to be much more difficult than Trip had anticipated. It was to be expected, of course, given both his work ethic and Lieutenant Commander Hess's injuries.

She could also tell that Commodore Archer was alongside him, evidently burying his grief with work.

Her sense of duty carried her to sickbay, and she paused at the threshold of the medical facility, momentarily overwhelmed at the putrid stench of seared flesh and human blood. Doctor Phlox stood before his master display and barely spared her a glance as she entered. His normally pristine medical smock was smeared crimson, and T'Pol forced herself to suppress the urge to recoil from the acrid stench of blood.

"Please make it quick," Phlox said as she approached, his eyes never leaving the monitor that he was studying. "I am very busy." T'Pol raised an eyebrow at his business-like manner; she could not recall witnessing him react in such a way.

But then, she realized, she had never seen him with quite as many patients at the same time.

"Can I be of assistance, Doctor?" she asked immediately, and he gave her a sidelong glance before shaking his head.

"Thank you, but no." He gestured toward the medical technicians swarming around sickbay. "My team has everything well in hand." Phlox started to turn away, but hesitated as something occurred to him. "You should have the revised casualty report in ten or fifteen minutes. I have attached *Horizon's* crew status to it as well." His normally jovial features were creased in an unfamiliar-looking frown. "Was there anything else?"

For a moment, T'Pol considered informing him about Captain Hernandez's demise and seeking any suggestions he may have about how to aid Commodore Archer in the grieving process. One look at the Denobulan's grim expression, however, banished that plan instantly. The doctor had enough to deal with at the moment, and adding to his workload was both illogical and cruel.

"No," she said in response. "That is all, Doctor."

With a sharp nod, the doctor turned away.



The medical officer's prognosis was damning.

"Three vertebrae were crushed and your spinal cord was damaged," she was saying as she studied the admiral's biological readouts. The junior lieutenant's tone bordered on callous as she spoke, and it took every gram of D'deridex's self control to not draw the *dathe'anofv-sen* at his side. "There is massive internal bleeding that we have been unable to stop," the physician continued, finally turning her eyes toward Admiral Valdore who was, impossibly, awake and aware.

He had regained consciousness as D'deridex struggled to carry him free of the shattered command section of *Ra'kholh*. Fires had been raging throughout the corridor as electro-plasma system conduits ruptured under the stress. Alarms wailed, and sparks tumbled to the deckplates from smoking junction boxes. Overhead lights flickered in erratic patterns, casting sinister shadows across the long corridor. It had been an image out of the darkest imaginings of *Areinnye*.

"I'm sorry, *Daise'Khre'Riov*," the medical officer finished, straightening as she did. She lifted her head, exposing her throat in a gesture of complete submission. "If you wish, I can ease the pain, but there is nothing else I can do with the tools available." She gestured briefly to the heavy damage within the medical facility.

Anger pulsed through D'deridex in that moment, a fury that clouded his mind with a green haze that made it difficult to think. His hand instinctively tightened on the hilt of the blade at his side, and he tensed, hoping for the admiral to issue the order. He wanted to lash out at anyone or anything. To his surprise, however, Valdore gave a sharp grunt of bitter laughter, grimacing almost instantly.

"Witness," he gasped. His eyes shifted to D'deridex. "By my authority," Valdore wheezed through clenched teeth, "I promote you to ... grade *Daise'Erei'Riov*." Blood trickled from the admiral's mouth as he forced himself to speak through the pain.

"Witnessed," the physician said instantly. She lifted her data device and began inputting notes. It would serve as an official record for the promotion to the rank of commander, providing the medical officer was not suborned by one of D'deridex's rivals. As it was a deathbed promotion by a fleet admiral, it would carry even greater prestige than a regular promotion, and D'deridex's relative youth would further mark him as different and worth watching. Few who served in the Fleet ever reached the rank of commander, and none did so at his age. Simply reaching the rank made one powerful enemies.

Valdore gave a sharp hand gesture of dismissal, once more groaning with the pain that it caused, and the physician obeyed without question. She caught D'deridex's eye as she turned, quirking an eyebrow slightly in a less than discreet gesture intended to convey her desire to speak with him later. D'deridex ignored her, though, focusing his attention on the agonized expression on Admiral Valdore's face.

"You honor me, sir," D'deridex said truthfully. Once more, he was surprised as the admiral reached out and grasped his arm with a crushing grip.

"Finish ... my task," Valdore gasped, clearly struggling to get the words out before he lost his last and greatest battle. "My quarters," he continued through the pain. "Command codes ... for operative ... human fleet." D'deridex blinked in surprise at the revelation; he knew that the *Tal Shiar* had Infiltrators among the Vuhlkansu, but to have an actual operative among the humans? "And keep Chulak ... from Xin'di. Our objective ... there too important..." The admiral grimaced, and D'deridex froze at his fierce look. "*Sthea'hwill?*"

D'deridex nodded, too stunned to respond vocally to the courtesy in the question's phrasing. By simple nature of their respective ranks, the admiral could have ordered him to obey without question, but instead he spoke to D'deridex as if they were equals. There was no higher compliment in the Rihannsu culture, and it shook the young commander to his very core.

"It will be done, *Daise'Khre'Riov*," he declared, gripping his mentor's hand with his own. "By my honor and the honor of my House, I will see it done." At his words, the admiral smiled grimly, blood staining his teeth emerald, and he closed his eyes.

A moment later, Valdore i'Kaleh tr'Irrhaimehn was dead.

D'deridex stood there for a long moment, holding onto the limp hand of the male he had come to respect more than life itself. A frown crossed the young commander's face as he realized what this death would mean for the Fleet; now, instead of pressing their advantage against the Terrans, the war would grind to a halt as the captains and admirals competed against one another to be appointed fleet commander. Against all military doctrine and logic, the humans would be given a reprieve.

Releasing the admiral's hand, D'deridex turned away, his eyes instantly seeking out the medical officer who yet remained the key to his promotion. He loathed this part of the service, hated having to deal with the politics inherent in promotion. If the system was truly efficient as S'Task had desired prior to his death, there would be no need for this game of politics. The junior lieutenant was mere meters away, attending to a horrifically burned engineer. As if sensing D'deridex's eyes on her, the physician looked up.

"*Daisemi'Maenek* of whatever vessel I command," D'deridex promised her, hoping that the lure of being named the chief medical officer would be enough. His was not a wealthy House, and if another offered her a greater prize to block him, he would be forced to kill her. He had no desire to kill a fellow Rihansu, not when there were still Enemies of the state.

"*Mnek'nra*," the physician accepted. She used the inferior mode, acknowledging that she was of lesser status than her future commanding officer. It was a good sign.

"How are you named?" D'deridex asked.

"I am known as S'enrae," she replied, bending her neck slightly. By offering only her given name in such a manner, her interest in an intimate relationship was also made apparent. It was a bold move that revealed even more information about her: she wanted power and saw in him an opportunity to grasp it. D'deridex frowned slightly, pushing those thoughts aside. He was not unwilling – she was slightly younger than he, quite attractive, and his time *was* nearing – but Valdore's task remained unfulfilled. There was no time to think about sex, not now, no matter how appealing such thoughts could be when centered around one such as she.

"We shall speak later," he declared as he strode from the medical facility.

Nearly ten *siuren* later, he was standing outside the admiral's quarters. To his complete surprise, the door annunciator accepted his thumbprint as a valid code for entry, an indication that the admiral had already planned for this contingency. The respect that D'deridex had for the now deceased Valdore increased exponentially as he stepped into the executive cabin.

Compared to his own quarters it was enormous, easily four to five times larger. A massive bed dominated the quarters, and a low couch added to the feel of luxury. Valdore's *dathe'anofv-sen* was upon the floor, evidently jarred from its place of honor by the massive shockwave that had nearly sliced the *Ra'kholh* in half. Kneeling before the Honor Blade, D'deridex studied it with a hint of awe. It was old, older than any *dathe'anofv-sen* that he had seen before, and beautifully crafted. With reverent motions,

he lifted the weapon from the floor and returned it to its place of honor. He would have to see that it was returned to *ch'Rihan* and the admiral's House lest one of Valdore's opponents acquire it. The idea of Commander Chulak in possession of such a priceless heirloom sent a shudder of disgust through D'deridex's body.

As he rose to his feet, the computer abruptly chirped, drawing his immediate attention. A disembodied voice echoed from the integrated speakers, and a sense of unease caused D'deridex to tense abruptly. Though he could not explain it, he knew that he was in danger.

"State identity," the computer demanded.

"D'deridex," he replied, pausing only briefly before adding, "*Daise'Erei'Riov*." Another chirp sounded.

"Identity accepted." The sense of danger faded. "State the nature of your inquiry."

"Display command codes for human operative," D'deridex ordered as he took a seat in front of the computer. He steepled his fingers as the computer hummed. A moment later, the operative's identity was known to him.

And he blinked in surprise.



He was good at feigning surprise.

"Are you sure?" Commodore Alexander Casey asked, an expression of perfectly simulated astonishment on his face. Behind his facade of surprise, however, his mind was racing.

"I am," Admiral Gardner said grimly. He looked up from his computer, pinning Alexander with a fierce look. "This doesn't leave the room until I announce it, Casey." At Alexander's nod of understanding, the fleet admiral exhaled heavily and began rubbing his temples as if to ward off a headache. "Starfleet Medical put their report on my desk thirty minutes ago, and Security agreed with their findings. It was suicide." He glowered at the table. "A single gunshot wound to the head."

Relief swept through Casey, and he felt the tension in his muscles lessen. He had been so worried that his handiwork wouldn't be enough, that the planted forensics evidence in Black's home would give him away. His contempt swelled as he realized that Starfleet Security would have headed up the investigation, and as experience had taught him, they were patently incompetent.

With the catastrophic end of Operation: Pandora, it was hardly a surprise that Hannibal Black had tendered his immediate resignation. He would go down in history as a total failure responsible for the loss of over a thousand officers and crewmembers. Casualty reports coming in from ships still in transit had been leaked by "anonymous sources," and the public had already started clamoring for heads to roll in Starfleet Command. To those properly briefed, there was never any doubt that Black would take the lion's share of the blame. Operation: Pandora was, after all, *his* baby. Resigning in disgrace was his only option.

Black had been surprised when Commodore Casey arrived to pay him a social visit that afternoon, ostensibly to offer his respects to the ex-admiral in the wake of the disaster that the news media was calling the greatest catastrophe since the Xindi assault over four and a half years ago. The admiral had already been partially drunk on Andorian ale when he let Casey in, and hadn't even noticed the gloves that his visitor was wearing, or the resolute expression on Casey's face. The antique pistol had been on the table where Black was sitting and drinking, a clear indication of the disgraced admiral's state of mind already. Sensing an opportunity, Casey had acted.

He held no regrets in that regard.

"I was at his house," Casey revealed to Gardner. By volunteering this information, he would be setting himself up as a potential suspect; but if he concealed it and the incompetents at Starfleet Security happened to stumble upon that fact, he would look guilty. The best lies, he reflected, were often rooted in the truth. "He was drunk, but I didn't think he was suicidal."

"Why were you there?" Gardner asked suddenly, a suspicious glint in his eyes. Casey shrugged.

"I didn't like him, sir," he admitted, "but we had a tolerable working relationship." Shifting his feet, he adopted a slightly embarrassed expression. "I was there to tell him that I respected his decision to resign the way he did." The fleet admiral grunted before turning away.

"In one hour," Gardner grouched, "I get to brief the president about this nightmare. Since next year is an election year, she's screaming bloody murder because her poll numbers are dropping." The admiral glared at the framed picture of United Earth's head of state on the far wall. It was standard issue for any government office, and revealed no hint of the woman's true nature. If one hadn't interacted with her on a semi-regular basis, one could be fooled into thinking she was the grandmotherly figure that she carefully cultivated in the public consciousness, instead of a vicious political animal who didn't know the meaning of mercy. Gardner's face suddenly contorted into a snarl. "One thousand, one hundred and six people are dead or presumed dead, and this bitch is worried about her fucking poll numbers!"

"She's a politician, sir," Casey pointed out. "That's what they do." He was suddenly eager to get out of this office and finish his clean-up work. Black had made a terrible mess of things, and Alexander was too deep in that mess not to get his hands dirty.

"I know." Gardner let out a heavy sigh, before studying Casey for a long moment. There was a weighing look in the admiral's eyes, as if he were attempting to determine how much he could trust Alexander. Finally, Gardner spoke. "I have a job for you," he said. "It's ideally suited to your talents. Can I trust you to handle it with discretion?"

"Yes, sir." Alexander assumed a position of attention as he replied.

"Good." Gardner frowned as he continued. "Black had a source of information about the Romulans. I want you to find out what or who it was." Casey blinked in slight surprise at that. He already knew the identity of the source, but couldn't let himself be connected to the Orion prisoner in any way.

"I'll do my best, sir." Alexander shifted slightly. "Admiral, I'll need my own people on this." He winced; this had to be phrased delicately. "Nothing against your Starfleet Security," Casey lied, somehow managing to keep a straight face as he did, "but I need people who I know and who know me."

"Get whoever you need," the admiral responded. "But find me that source."

"Yes, sir. Will there be anything else, sir?"

"No," Gardner said as he shook his head. "Dismissed."

The trip to the secret holding cell took nearly ten minutes, and during that time Casey decided on a course of action. He gave the two ex-MACOs standing guard outside the cell a glance, matching their faces to what he recalled of their files. A sigh of relief worked its way past his lips. They were Red Sabre, ex-black ops who had absolutely no compunction with murder. Fewer than twelve members of the outlawed Red Sabre team were still alive, and these two were the only ones on the planet.

With a hiss, the pressure door slid open, revealing the hulking Orion male. Harrad-Sar looked up at Alexander's entrance and started to smile. It wasn't the Orion's usual obsequious smile, but rather a mocking smirk of sinister amusement. Casey's eyes narrowed.

"You know," he said coldly, and the Orion's smirk broadened.

"That the Romulans were waiting for you?" Harrad-Sar asked before chuckling. "I warned Black that they had sources of intelligence you silly monkeys don't know about." He leaned back in his less than sturdy looking chair. "Will the good admiral not be joining us today?"

"No." Casey crossed his arms. "Our arrangement is at end, *alien*," he declared abruptly. The flicker of understanding that crossed the Orion's face was almost enjoyable. "You have outlived your usefulness to us."

"Wait!" Harrad-Sar stumbled to his feet, a pleading look on his face.

But it was already too late.

At Casey's signal, the two security troopers drew their sidearms in what appeared to be synchronized motions. Phased energy flashed out, slicing into Harrad-Sar's body with lethal results. The Orion dropped like a puppet with its strings cut, and the two men advanced into the room, weapons still trained on him. They fired again. And again.

And again.

Satisfied that the Orion was dead, they glanced in Casey's direction. He gave them both approving nods.

"Sterilize this cell," he ordered. "I want there to be no trace that he was ever here."

"Aye, sir," they replied in unison, and Alexander turned away.

An hour later, Casey was in his apartment, sitting in the dark and sipping scotch. He stared at the framed MACO flag on his wall, wondering when it had all gone wrong. He was a patriot, after all, and had only wanted the best for his home world. Despite his efforts, though, the United Earth Senate had foolishly voted to fold the Military Assault Command Operations into MACO Starfleet, placing his

professional soldiers under the command of fools who didn't understand the first thing about waging a war. One would think that Earth's tepid response to the Xindi assault would have been proof of that. It was only by gritting his teeth and accepting the rank of commodore (an absurd rank, if there ever was one) that Casey could attempt to keep his troopers safe. And even then, they were getting killed.

Desperate times had called for desperate measures, he told himself. It was poor comfort.

The hiss of his door opening caused him to scramble for his sidearm, but he lowered it when he recognized his visitor.

"What are you doing here?" he asked urgently. "You could have been recognized!"

"Do you want me to go?" she asked, and Casey felt his fear evaporate as her distinctive perfume washed over him. Of course he didn't want her to leave!

"No," he whispered as she glided toward him, her eyes sparkling with amusement. He could feel his heart racing, and hated that she could do this to him.

"Is Harrad-Sar dead?" she asked as she stroked his cheek, and Alexander nodded quickly. She smiled. "Good." Her fingers danced on his neck, beating time with his rapid pulse. "Now tell me about the rest of your day." She smiled, but it held no warmth. "And leave nothing out." As in all things, he was her slave.

So, he began to speak.



He didn't know what to say.

"And that's why I wanted to talk to you, sir," newly promoted Lieutenant Commander Hsiao was speaking, an expression of discomfort on his face. Despite the circumstances, Trip couldn't help but smile at the familiarity of this situation. He'd struggled over the very same decision nearly two years ago when Starfleet Command had offered him a captaincy.

"What I think doesn't matter here, Dan," he replied slowly. "But if you really want my opinion, I think that you've already made your decision." Hsiao gave him a conflicted look before glancing away, already deep in thought. Trip leaned back in his seat, glancing quickly at the chronometer. He still had twenty minutes before his shuttlepod departed for Earth, but the long transit time at impulse made the ferry schedules nearly impossible to alter. They waited for no one.

"I guess I have," Hsiao finally admitted, which brought another smile to Trip's face. Because of Hsiao's battlefield performance, coupled with glowing reports from the officers and crewmembers of *Hyperion* who credited him with saving their lives, Starfleet had promoted the young helmsman and offered him the job as commanding officer of the *Daedalus*-class. The job offer was an indication both of Dan's abilities and of Starfleet's continuing need for effective combat leaders..

Trip also saw it as a warning: it now seemed inevitable that T'Pol, as one of the most experienced officers in the fleet, would also be promoted and reassigned.

"You realize," Tucker said with a joking smile as he stood up, "that this leaves me without a helmsman, right?" Hsiao rose as well, an expression of mild surprise on his face.

"Ensign Jefferson," he started, but Trip interrupted.

"Is at Starfleet Medical." The smile faded as Tucker recalled the doctor's prognosis. "Shrapnel punctured his left eye," he revealed grimly. "His piloting days are over."

"My God," Hsiao whispered. "I didn't know..." He suddenly looked uncomfortable, as if he were reconsidering his decision.

"Dan," Trip said calmly as he offered his hand. "*Hyperion* needs you. We'll get by." As the young lieutenant commander took his hand, Tucker smiled once more. "And once you get her up and running again, I'll expect a tour."

"Any time, Captain." As Hsiao disappeared through the ready room door, Trip collapsed in his chair once more, his mind buzzing. Dan was a popular officer, and his loss would have an effect on the ship's morale, especially in the wake of the disaster at Zeta Reticuli. For a moment, Tucker wondered if Hsiao knew that Lieutenant Devereux was also at Starfleet Medical; the same shrapnel that had ended Jefferson's career as a pilot had also punctured Devereux's left eardrum.

Exactly thirty-six seconds after Hsiao exited, T'Pol entered the ready room, a PADD in her hand. Years earlier while on *Enterprise*, Trip had timed how long it took her to leave her station and walk to the ready room; it was nice to know that she hadn't changed much since then.

"Here are my suggested revisions," T'Pol said without preamble, offering the data device as she spoke. Trip nodded as he accepted the PADD, wondering why she even bothered submitting this sort of thing for his approval. Unless it involved engineering in some capacity, he usually just signed off on it once he saw that she was the author. Most of the time, he didn't even bother to read what she had sent and simply approved it upon receipt.

This time, however, he gave it a quick once-over since he had asked her for input. The battle at Acheron had been a wake up call to him regarding the dangers of keeping the command staff in such an exposed location like the bridge. With this standing order, Trip was making the A Deck bridge off limits to all personnel without his express permission. From now on, auxiliary command *was* the bridge. Placing his thumb upon the small optical scanner, he made the decision official. Perhaps someday, after this war was over and Starfleet returned to its original job as explorers, the bridge could be used again, but right now, it was just too dangerous.

"Is everything ready?" he asked cryptically, knowing that she would understand. She quirked an eyebrow at his curious choice of words, but did not remark on the illogic of his statement.

"Yes," T'Pol replied. "Have you spoken to him yet?" There was no need to identify whom she was talking about and, once more, sadness competed against anger. Trip handed her the PADD, his face grim.

"Not since we arrived at Earth," he responded. It was frustrating, knowing that one of his best friends was hurting as badly as Jon was, even if one couldn't tell by looking at him. For the entire twenty-three days it had taken *Endeavour* to reach Earth, Archer had buried himself in work, refusing even to speak about Erika. By the third day, Trip had given up trying to get his old friend to open up and had simply turned over command to T'Pol while he labored alongside Jon, hoping that his presence would be enough.

A frown crossed Tucker's face when he realized that he vaguely recalled seeing Archer like this once before, when Henry Archer had passed away. That led to a moment of confusion as Trip tried to reconcile his curiously jumbled memories. Though he had never met Henry, he had odd memories of doing that very thing, many years before he even knew Jon. But that didn't make any sense either, what with Henry Archer dying of Clarke's Disease before Jon's thirteenth birthday. Trip shook his head in annoyance, trying to focus his attention back on the present. These sorts of conflicting memory flashes had happened sporadically over the years, beginning a couple of weeks after *Enterprise's* jaunt to the Second World War. T'Pol had admitted to experiencing the same sort of thing on occasion, prompting her to theorize that the temporal manipulation by Daniels' associates was not quite as precise as it could be.

For Trip, that sort of thinking inevitable led to headaches.

He stood, grabbing his personal PADD as he did so.

"You're in command, T'Pol," Tucker said as he turned toward the door. He offered his right hand, two fingers extended, and very nearly grinned at the expression of surprise that flashed across her face. It was gone almost before it appeared, and she reciprocated, touching her fingers to his. The warmth that always washed through his mind when they exchanged the *ozh'esta* caused him to smile as he soaked in her affection.

Five hours later, he was finally stepping out of the shuttlepod, grateful that the ridiculously long trip was finally over. Shifting his small duffel back to one shoulder, he gave the pilot an appreciative nod before beginning the short trek from the landing pad to the entrance to Command. A trio of heavily armed and armored guards was standing outside the doorway, and he offered them his identification without being prompted. The duffel went onto a scanner; the young girl operating the device gave Tucker an odd look at the contents, but cleared him without question.

Nearly twenty minutes passed before he reached his destination. He recognized the petty officer outside the office, and gave the young man a questioning look.

"It's after midnight, Tyner," Trip pointed out. "Shouldn't you be in quarters?"

"He needs me here, sir." Tucker frowned at the petty officer's obvious exhaustion and made a decision.

"Go home," he said. "I'll take care of him." He didn't wait for a response or clearance, and pushed the OPN command on the door annunciator.

As he expected, Jonathan Archer was seated at the desk, dozens of clipboards and several PADDs on his desk. The wall monitor was split-screened, with the two most prominent news channels on; both were muted. Evidence of the previous occupant was still present, especially with the thick smell of cof-

fee that seemed to permeate the entire office, but Jon had already made it his own. Curled up on the couch, Archer's new beagle Dumas gave Trip a wary look before resuming his nap.

"I'm busy, Trip," Archer said without even looking up from his computer. His fingers were tapping out a steady rhythm on the keyboard.

"Yes, sir." Tucker made his way to the chair in front of the desk and lowered himself into it. The duffel he carefully placed on the floor. "Congratulations on the promotion, Admiral." Archer grunted slightly before giving the wall monitor a glance. A frown crossed his face instantly, and Trip followed the admiral's line of sight.

Prominently displayed on the less reputable station was a headline that caused Tucker to sigh in disgust. At face value, "Xindi Link to Romulans!" wasn't entirely inaccurate, but the implication that the Xindi attack had been *instigated* by the Romulans was completely unfounded. Trip's stomach tightened at the thought of that attack, and he pushed down the bitter sadness over Lizzie's death that always seemed to resurface at the most inopportune times.

"I need you on your ship, getting her battle ready, Captain," Archer grouched. He was going out of his way to avoid making eye contact as he spoke. "If the Romulans press the attack, then you'll be on the front line."

"T'Pol has everything under control." Trip frowned as he glanced at one of the PADDs on Archer's desk; it had some vaguely familiar schematics upon it. "*Endeavour* is battle ready now, sir. The new hull polarizers worked better than expected." The PADD's screen abruptly blanked out as the power saver mode activated.

"Good." Archer glared at his personal computer but, once again, didn't make eye contact. Trip's concern grew as he recognized his old friend's attempt to avoid uncomfortable subjects by focusing on work. "Command will probably be issuing you new orders in a day or so. The Third has already been deployed to Alpha Centauri, and the Fourth to Tau Ceti." He shuffled through the papers on one of the clipboards. "Until we have a better picture of the strategic situation, *Endeavour* is probably going to remain in-system, though."

"Jon." Use of Archer's given name caused him finally to meet Trip's eyes. For the briefest of seconds, a hint of the pain that the admiral was hiding could be seen before he managed to conceal it. "How are you doing?" Trip asked.

"How do you think I'm doing?" Archer snapped. He gestured to the mess on his desk. "Thirteen ships got out of Acheron, Trip. Thirteen out of thirty." Anger was stamped on his face. "And every one of them is in need of repair!" He glared as he continued. "The damned Coalition is falling apart because the Tellarites won't help us, the Vulcans *can't* help us, and the Andorians are too damned busy shooting at Orions to even listen to us! How the hell do you think I'm doing?"

"That wasn't what I was talking about," Tucker pointed out.

"I know." Jon's anger dwindled, and he offered Tucker an apologetic look. "I can't think about that right now, Trip." Glancing at the computer monitor once more, Archer seemed to shudder slightly. "If I think about her, I'm afraid I'll lose it," he admitted.

"I understand," Trip said, and he did. When Lizzie had died, he had refused to face the loss and had wrapped himself up in anger so he wouldn't have to. He didn't want to see Jon suffer from the same thing.

"I hate them," Archer said abruptly. At Trip's look, he explained, bitterness in his voice. "The Romulans. I hate every single one of them." He glared at his computer and visibly composed himself. "But I can't afford the luxury of hate. Not now. Not while wearing this uniform." The sadness was once more in his eyes, and he blinked away a tear. "Too many people are relying on me to be something I'm not."

"If you need anything, Jon..." Tucker offered as he reached into his duffel. Archer interrupted with another sad frown.

"I know, Trip." The admiral was back, replacing the wounded friend who had been there if only for a moment. "I appreciate that, but I've got too much work to do."

"Start tomorrow," Trip said. He placed the bottle of bourbon on the desk. Jon looked at it for a long moment, clearly torn between duty and sorrow.

Sorrow won.

END